

# The Concept of Free Nature in Murray Bookchin's Philosophy of Social Ecology

Eirik Eiglad



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# Sammendrag

Denne oppgaven utforsker Murray Bookchins sosialøkologiske filosofi og fokuserer spesielt på begrepet “fri natur.” Bookchin (1921-2006) var en sentral foregangsfigur i den internasjonale økologibevegelsen: svært tidlig argumenterte han for at økologien ville lede oss til radikale filosofiske, etiske, praktiske og politiske konklusjoner. I denne oppgaven presenterer jeg den dialektiske naturalismen. Dette er det underliggende filosofiske rammeverket for sosialøkologien, og underbygger dens samfunnsanalyser, etiske grunnsyn og politiske konklusjoner. Den dialektiske naturalismen forstår naturen som dens evolusjon: en kumulativ utvikling i retning av økt differensiering, økt kompleksitet og stadig høyere grad av subjektivitet. Menneskesamfunnet har sitt utspring i en slik “første natur,” men samtidig utgjør en særegen “andre natur” som potensielt sett kan bli “naturens egen selvbevissthet.” Dette grunnsynet leder til politiske konklusjoner og ambisjoner om å skape et fritt, økologisk samfunn. Jeg gir et overblikk over sosialøkologiens dialektiske historiefilosofi og antihierarkiske samfunnsanalyse og forklarer konteksten til sosialøkologiens begrep om en fri natur. Jeg hevder at sosialøkologiens etiske og politiske perspektiver utledes direkte fra dens dialektiske naturfilosofi og dens forventninger til at menneskeheten kan skape et økologisk samfunn. Jeg argumenterer også for at dagens miljøbevegelse har mye å lære fra Bookchins sosialøkologi, spesielt når det gjelder utformingen av en generøs økologisk humanisme og en etisk fundert samfunnskritikk.

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# Preface

The American philosopher and social theorist Murray Bookchin (1921-2006) was a pioneer in the international ecology movement: already in the 1950s and 60s, Bookchin saw that impending ecological crises presented a profound challenge to our social order.

Bookchin was an early advocate of decentralization and human scale, renewable energy and ecological technologies, a new ecological outlook and new social relationships. In the decades that followed, Bookchin would develop his social ecological analyses into a comprehensive body of thought that fundamentally reconsiders humanity's place in the natural world, and assesses its implications for society, ethics, and politics.

In this thesis I will explore Bookchin's philosophy of social ecology, focusing on the concept of "free nature." My focus is on the underlying philosophical framework of social ecology, called "dialectical naturalism," and how it sustains its social analyses, its ethical outlook, and its political conclusions. I will explain how dialectical naturalism understands nature *as* its evolution: a perspective on nature as a phenomenon constituting a cumulative development toward increasing differentiation, complexity, and ever-greater levels of subjectivity. Human society, Bookchin argues, has its roots in this "first nature," but

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<sup>1</sup> Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1986), xxxiv.

constitutes a distinct “second nature” that can potentially become “nature rendered self-conscious.”

My ambition in writing this thesis is twofold. On the one hand, I will situate social ecology within broader traditions of ecological thought and on the other hand, I will strive to present a coherent overview of Bookchin’s basic philosophical ideas and their implications. I believe that contemporary ecology movements have much to learn from Bookchin’s social ecology, particularly from his ambitious social critique and formulations of a generous ecological humanism. I will argue that these perspectives stem directly from the philosophy of social ecology and its expectation that humanity *can* create an ecological *society*.

Before I can begin to explore the ideas of social ecology, it would be useful to give some background on Norwegian ecophilosophy and its notions of “free nature,” as they differ significantly from how this concept is understood in Bookchin’s social ecology. Bookchin’s ideas are not well known within Norway, and given Norway’s own strong domestic traditions for ecological philosophy, which have nourished significant ecophilosophers, a comparison is in order. In particular, I will highlight the thoughts of Peter Wessel Zapffe and Arne Næss, two seminal Norwegian ecophilosophers. To be sure, the outlooks of these two thinkers differed greatly: Zapffe was an existentialist dualist denying humans any place in nature, while Næss was an ontological monist that claimed “all life is one”—yet they both shared a fundamental appreciation of “free nature,” as the term is understood in Scandinavia. Chapter One, “Concepts of Free Nature,” will provide a context for contrasting Bookchin’s views to these ecophilosophers and to broader Scandinavian notions of what nature is. This discussion, I hope, will help illuminate the originality of Bookchin’s ideas and also to clarify just what social ecology promises through its hopes for attaining a free nature.

Now, before we enter into the thesis proper I need to voice a caveat. Murray Bookchin was both a generalist in the classic sense and a highly engaged intellectual: his oeuvre of more than twenty books and numerous articles spans a wide array of topics: from ontology, ethics, and epistemology, to history, technology, and movement strategy. Since the concept and promise of a free nature is so fundamental to social ecology, it both informs and is informed by various disciplines. For Bookchin, ontology, ethics, and political theory were all part of one philosophical “totality,” and not always in straightforward ways. Therefore, I have made an effort so that my priorities, presentation, and transitions makes sense to the reader. Arguments that are secondary to the central flow of the thesis, but which I deem necessary to nuance arguments, are relegated to the footnotes.

In this thesis I hope to clarify the foundational premises of Bookchin's social ecology. I will give an overview of philosophy of nature that accounts for evolution and agency, as well as a philosophy of history that accounts for the antagonisms between society and nature, and, finally, a political philosophy that seeks to actualize a free nature by remaking society. Taken together, I believe they clarify what the concept of free nature means in the context of Murray Bookchin's philosophy of social ecology.

At the end of my thesis, then, I hope to have clarified how social ecology links nature philosophy, anti-hierarchical social analyses, and political regeneration. I believe that Bookchin's dialectical naturalism, his broad social analyses, and his visions of an ecological society, offer valuable insights to ecological thinking—insights that may help sharpen our sensitivity to the deeper questions of life, human agency, and ecological regeneration.



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*If only because this planet's history, including its human history, has been so full of promise, hope, and creativity, it deserves a better fate than what seems to confront it in the years ahead.<sup>1</sup>*

# Concepts of Free Nature

A world without human beings would be no tragedy, said Norwegian philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe. If we rid ourselves of our delusional self-defense mechanisms, and boldly look deep into our existence, he claimed, we will come to realize that our presence here—or disappearance—does not make much difference at all. A deserted planet is no tragedy.<sup>2</sup>

What *is* genuinely tragic, according to Zapffe, is our human existence on this planet. Humankind is distinguished by our insatiable need to find purpose in a deterministic natural world of materiality and pure causality. We are condemned to search for meaning where there is none: as *meta-physical* beings, we are condemned to think, to speculate, and to seek meaning; but in the physical world, in nature, this meaning is nowhere to be found. There is nothing that can illuminate our existence and bring purpose to our lives, yet we are doomed to seek it. From a human perspective, he claims, the natural world is chaotic, aimless, and meaningless, and it is precisely human attempts to render that world meaningful that set us

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<sup>1</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom* (Oakland: AK Press, 2005), 469.

<sup>2</sup> “For me,” Zapffe explains, “a desert island is no tragedy, neither is a deserted planet.” See Peter Wessel Zapffe, in dialogue with Herman Tønnessen, *Jeg velger sannheten* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1983), 60. Little of Zapffe’s work is translated into English, and here I will rely on the translations made available in Peter Reed and David Rothenberg, eds., *Wisdom in the Open Air: The Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

apart from nature and cause our existential *angst*. Our efforts to elicit or impose order on the natural world can only result in tragedy.

The human destiny, and our eventual downfall, is tied up with the futility—indeed, impossibility—of finding a place within the natural world. According to Zapffe, it is our brains—representing our capacity for metaphysical speculation and technological innovation—that deny us a home in the world. Since we cannot find any meaning in nature, we construct it through civilization, which for Zapffe represents elaborate systems of self-censorship and self-deception that allow us to artificially maintain the illusion that the world is meaningful. Technology, in turn, will not liberate humanity, but only liberate time for us to look deeper into the abyss. Civilization cannot be sustained forever, and technology will eventually force us to face our demons.

Indeed, the entire human quest for meaning and truth is a gross delusion, complained Zapffe, one to which we are drawn “like moths to a flame.”<sup>3</sup> We may excel at comprehending the realm of nature, Zapffe admits, but there is no deeper *truth* to our understanding. Subsequently, the more we approach purposefulness, such as the idea of love, or the idea of a moral universe, the more delusional we get. The “closer” we come any illusion of “truth,” the more it consumes us, and this contradiction plagues our angst-ridden existence.<sup>4</sup> The human condition is so structured so that it ensures—by necessity—that strings of tragic sequences will arise; tragedies that reveal the futility of our existence. Only intellectual dishonesty can serve to render our world meaningful.

Human beings may have roots in nature, Zapffe contends, but we are a monstrous outgrowth of biological evolution: our mental capacities outstrip any relevance for maintaining survival and coexistence in the environment. Indeed, we represent “a break in the very unity of life, a biological paradox, a monstrosity, and absurdity, a hypertrophy of the most catastrophic kind.”<sup>5</sup> Zapffe compares the predicament of our species to that of the legendary “Irish elk,” whose antlers grew so enormous that they hampered practical life and led these Pleistocene giant deer to extinction. But for Zapffe, humans are not only biological misfits. Our human capacity for reason and reflection is more than a freak tool, it is also a dangerous weapon. In our beings, “Nature had aimed too high, and outdone itself. A species had been too

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<sup>3</sup> Gisle Tangen, “The View from Mount Zapffe,” *Philosophy Now*, No. 45 (2004).

<sup>4</sup> The Kierkegaardian *Angst* that permeates our being, Zapffe claims, can only be avoided by our psychological self-defense mechanisms of attachment, diversion, and sublimation, which in turn frame our very civilization.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Wessel Zapffe, “The Last Messiah,” in Reed and Rothenberg, eds., *Wisdom in the Open Air*, 41.

heavily armed—its genius made it not only omnipotent over the outer world, but equally dangerous for itself.”<sup>6</sup>

Zapffe consistently denigrates our uniquely human characteristics and denies them any place in nature. Our biological predicament is that we have learned enough about the natural world and ourselves to realize that the planet would be better off without us. Zapffe is adamantly clear that there we have no prospects for social change or personal redemption. As a result, Zapffe’s existentialism is often referred to as “pessimistic,” but that would be a gross understatement: his deep misanthropy is expressly antihumanist.

Not only does Zapffe deny humanity any prospects for the reharmonization of our societies with nature; he welcomes the end of the human race. “Our only choice now is to abdicate our reigning role, gracefully die out, and let some other species do what it can with this best of possible worlds.”<sup>7</sup> The suggested means for human abdication was voluntary infertility. As he voiced in *The Last Messiah*: “Know thyself; be unfruitful and let there be peace on Earth after thy passing.”<sup>8</sup> He did not consider this far-fetched or impossible: if only we could “reach a global agreement on giving birth to fewer children, below reproduction rates, it would only take a few generations before humankind would resemble not ‘the stars or the ocean sand, but a river dwindling to nothing in the great drought.’”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Zapffe, we are told, was a “man hell-bent on the end of the human race.”<sup>10</sup>

Zapffe provided the intellectual backdrop for the emergence of Norwegian philosophies of ecology. In the 1940s, Zapffe coined the term “biosophy” to designate his original brand of existentialism. Zapffe believed that only by “dehumanizing ourselves” and fully embracing our biological being could we identify with and appreciate nature. Few would agree to Zapffe’s radical dualism. Peter Reed made one of the few attempts to translate Zapffean existentialism into deep ecological activism, seeking, on the basis of humanity’s radical

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Reed and Rothenberg, eds., *Wisdom in the Open Air*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Zapffe, “The Last Messiah,” 52.

<sup>9</sup> Zapffe quoted in Tangenes, “The View from Mount Zapffe.”

<sup>10</sup> Reed and Rothenberg, eds., *Wisdom in the Open Air*, 40. An avowed misanthropist, Reed claims that Zapffe is not actually arguing for collective suicide, rather he is “only” seeking to put a question mark around *the whole of human existence*: “Do we need, or deserve, to survive?” He concludes that, “When it is clear that there is value and beauty and wonder and greatness that is wholly independent of us, we cannot conclude that the universe would be a whole lot worse off without us.” Peter Reed, “Man Apart: An Alternative to the Self-Realization Approach,” in *Philosophical Dialogues: Arne Næss and the Future of Ecophilosophy*, edited by Nina Witoszek and Andrew Brennan (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 192, emphasis added.

apartness, to cultivate an “awe for nature.”<sup>11</sup> Still, Zapffe’s significance as a forerunner to the Norwegian deep ecology movement is immense. Although he never gained a large following, and mainly influenced the small mountaineering community in Norway, it should be noted that this was a milieu that included a series of significant activists and creative thinkers, such as Sigmund Kvaløy, Arne Næss, and Nils Faarlund.

Arne Næss was certainly full of admiration for Zapffe’s philosophical achievements. In the 1960s and 1970s, Næss would follow his mentor into ecological philosophy, and, although Næss did not accept Zapffe’s radical dualism, and would indeed draw diametrically different ecophilosophical conclusions, Zapffe was undoubtedly his most significant philosophical interlocutor.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Zapffe’s “influence on Norwegian ecophilosophy is nothing less than tremendous,” Reed and Rothenberg explain: “Themes as diverse as the value of cultural diversity, of a sense of identity with nature, and of a suspicion of technology all have roots in Zapffe’s work.”<sup>13</sup>

Mountaineering, for Zapffe, “is a deep philosophy: It touches a piece of the incomprehensible, the magnificent, the consciousness-expanding cosmic adventure of what it is to be a human being in the world.”<sup>14</sup> This, however, is not about finding a *human* place in the world or bringing meaning to *our* existence. These personal, existential encounters with the enormity and dangers of nature are more authentic experiences: “its face is turned toward death and life, not the stilted artificiality of human fellowship.” Indeed, “the more you climb, the more your body purges itself of the poisons accumulated in human society.”<sup>15</sup>

“Before most Norwegians had begun to think of nature’s beauty as something that required protection,” Reed and Rothenberg write, “Zapffe was warning against roads, dams, and tourism that threatened to desecrate nature’s quiet sanctuary.”<sup>16</sup> Zapffe, Næss rejoins, “has always been a fierce opponent of the destruction of free nature.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Both Peter Reed’s essay and Arne Næss’s “‘Man Apart’ and Deep Ecology: A Reply to Reed,” are highly instructive. See their contributions in Witoszek and Brennan, eds., *Philosophical Dialogues*, 181-205.

<sup>12</sup> Nina Witoszek, “Arne Næss and the Norwegian Nature Tradition,” in Witoszek and Brennan, eds., *Philosophical Dialogues*, 461.

<sup>13</sup> Reed and Rothenberg, eds., *Wisdom in the Open Air*, 38.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Wessel Zapffe, “Farewell, Norway,” in Reed and Rothenberg, eds. *Wisdom in the Open Air*, 58.

<sup>15</sup> These words are uttered by Jørgen, Zapffe’s protagonist in “Farewell, Norway.” Ibid., 58-59. For more on this mountaineering milieu, which fostered a variety of ecophilosophies, see, for example, Truls Gjefsen, *Arne Næss: Et liv* (Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2011), 274-286, 296-305.

<sup>16</sup> Reed and Rothenberg, eds., *Wisdom in the Open Air*, 37.

<sup>17</sup> Arne Næss, “‘Man Apart’ and Deep Ecology,” in Witoszek and Brennan, eds., *Philosophical Dialogues*, 204.



## Scandinavian Notions of Free Nature and Open Air

But what is “free nature”? Here, it is interesting to note that while the concept of “nature” is notoriously evasive and difficult to describe, I believe that most people in Norway would be able to immediately answer what “*free* nature” is. The notion of free nature—or, more metaphorically, “God’s free nature”—is well-established in Scandinavia. It is not exactly conveyed by “wild nature” or “wilderness,” nor by “the great outdoors.” In a sense, the Norwegian concept of free nature expresses the connection between the individual and elemental forces of nature, or, as Henrik Ibsen said, the unification of freedom and God. Free Nature, as it is understood here, should be relatively untouched by human beings: it demands no human absense, but it is a realm where the forces of nature “govern” life and work. This notion of free nature refers more broadly to the openness of nature, as an accessible nature, and nature as a source of spiritual nourishment. In this free nature, we can “breathe freely.” It is not only a place for exploration and contemplation, but where we are exposed to the elemental forces of nature and can have authentic experiences of nature.

“Contrary to expectation,” Næss explains, “urbanized life has not killed human fascination with free nature.”<sup>18</sup> However, “we often underestimate the influence that being in the free nature has on our mind and our lifestyles.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, “we belong to a culture,” laments Nils Faarlund, “that has failed to recreate a sense of free nature as our true home.” As a result, free nature has lost standing.<sup>20</sup> “Without the possibility of making friends with free nature,” he concludes, “we remain homeless in a world of technology.”<sup>21</sup>

However, Næss discloses, “there is fortunately a way of life in free nature that is highly efficient in stimulating the sense of oneness, wholeness, and deepening identification.”<sup>22</sup> There exists in Norway “a type of outdoor recreation that seeks to come to nature on its own terms:

<sup>18</sup> Arne Næss, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, edited by David Rothenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 177. “There is some truth in the belief that most Norwegians have a strong feeling for Nature,” he says elsewhere. “Since they use the word mainly about that they conceive as ‘untouched,’ nonexploited Nature,” he explains, “I write the word with a capital *N*: Nature.” Arne Næss, *Life’s Philosophy: Reason and Feeling in a Deeper World*, with Per Ingvar Haukland (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 104. As far as I can judge from Næss’s writings, he uses the terms interchangeably. In this sense, “Nature,” for Næss, in most situations, means roughly the same as “free nature.”

<sup>19</sup> Nils Faarlund, “A Way Home,” in Rothenberg and Reed, eds., *Wisdom in the Open Air*, 157.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> By “free nature,” Faarlund means archetypal nature: “The original and ‘unabridged nature’—the archetypal—becomes a basic value.” Ibid., 166.

<sup>22</sup> Næss, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, 177.

to *touch the earth lightly*.”<sup>23</sup> This recreational activity is commonly termed “friluftsliv,” which best translates as “living out in the open air” or “open air life.”

Faarlund explains how “*friluftsliv* is a living tradition for recreating nature-consonant lifestyles. It implies making friends with nature and passionately recreating free nature’s standing in our culture.”<sup>24</sup> Open air activities “show a respect for natural processes and for the realization of all life. They take place in relatively free nature,” and they “present a diverse range of challenges to the total person, and are an opportunity for emotional, physical, and intellectual engagement.”<sup>25</sup>

The concept of “open air life” may be found among outdoor people all over the world, but as a specific philosophy, and a specific terminology, Hans Gelter explains, it is unique for Scandinavia: here “*friluftsliv* is deeply rooted in the soul of the people.”<sup>26</sup> As a philosophical tendency, “open air life” became “a way to realize the ideas of romanticism, to reconnect with nature and the old Scandinavian outdoor tradition.”<sup>27</sup> Apparently, there is something uniquely Norwegian about our relationship to nature: “The Romantic movement,” Faarlund declares, “struck a deep chord in the soul of Norwegians, and led to a revival of a national identity; *this* is Norway, this is free nature, and we are unique as Norwegians to have it.”<sup>28</sup>

Although we may now live in cities detached from nature, Faarlund claims that “this urge to regain citizenship in the *real* Norway still touches Norwegians deeply.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, for Faarlund, this leads to a fundamental redefinition of citizenship: The basic idea is to redefine an *individual* identity, by “paring a person built in the city down to some sort of ‘essential self.’”<sup>30</sup> Such a lifestyle, Næss agreed, shows that there is an alternative to living “a life characterized by machines and crowded quarters.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., emphasis in original.

<sup>24</sup> Faarlund, “A Way Home,” 164.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 163. Faarlund approvingly quotes Konrad Lorenz’s assertion that “Nature is immediately understandable.” Faarlund continues: “That’s one reason why the best method for guiding people into the open air is to shut up. It’s only after we have gone through a modern education that we lose this understanding. We become attached to a modern Newtonian worldview. *Friluftsliv* recommends that we jump over that education, forget it, listen to what nature tells us, let nature get into us, and use new expressions, if necessary, to describe what we have heard.” Faarlund, “*Touch the Earth*,” 171.

<sup>26</sup> Hans Gelter, “*Friluftsliv*: The Scandinavian Philosophy of Outdoor Life,” *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, No. 5 (2000), 79. Faarlund agrees: the “social, personal, national identity that *friluftsliv* provides in Norway is rather unique.” Faarlund, “*Touch the Earth*,” in Rothenberg and Reed, eds., *Wisdom in the Open Air*, 172.

<sup>27</sup> Gelter, “*Friluftsliv*,” 79.

<sup>28</sup> Faarlund, “A Way Home,” 163.

<sup>29</sup> Faarlund, “*Touch the Earth*,” 172, emphasis in original.

<sup>30</sup> Faarlund, “A Way Home,” 164; “I hope that people will come to see that big cities stand in the way of getting to know nature.” Faarlund, “*Touch the Earth*,” 174.

<sup>31</sup> Næss, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, 178.

“In Norway, the tradition of *friluftsliv* is a way of recreating understanding for nature, of rediscovering the true home of mankind.”<sup>32</sup> *Friluftsliv* as philosophy is meant to help us “move from a techno-life to an eco-life, back to our fundamental biological ways to relate to nature.”<sup>33</sup> The significance of such an “open air” philosophy was not lost to the Norwegian ecophilosophers: “We should see true *friluftsliv* as a route towards paradigm change,” said Arne Næss.<sup>34</sup> He claims that it serves to make people feel that they *can* be at home in nature again. The kind of society it can lead to, we learn, is a way of life in which there is close daily contact with nature. Faarlund even proposes that nurturing “open air life” is “the clearest way toward resolution of our ecological crises.”<sup>35</sup> Faarlund continues: “What we are about here is a cultural rescue attempt, rescuing free nature from an avalanche of aggressive and hopeless human beings.”<sup>36</sup>

The essential idea is, as Næss has proposed, that “a deep experience of nature creates deep feelings leading to deep questions and a deep commitment for nature.”<sup>37</sup> In this sense, “open air life” designates “a philosophical lifestyle based on experiences of the freedom in nature and the spiritual connectedness with the landscape.”<sup>38</sup> The essence and reward of a lifestyle, Gelter explains, is a strong sensation of a new level of consciousness and a spiritual wholeness.<sup>39</sup> Apparently, there is “a deep philosophy in the woods, mountains, and water, a philosophy we can better dream of than describe, a philosophy only first-hand meetings with nature can intimate.”<sup>40</sup> Such “personal friendships with nature,” Faarlund approves, “are going to form the backbone of the efforts needed to rescue a nature in distress.”<sup>41</sup>

“Deep ecology,” Reed and Rothenberg surmised, “must have roots far down in Norwegian culture, if it is to have any genuine depth,” and in exploring the Norwegian genealogy of ecophilosophy, they found “a unique tradition of interconnected thinkers, touched by each

<sup>32</sup> Faarlund, “A Way Home,” 158.

<sup>33</sup> Gelter, “Friluftsliv,” 82.

<sup>34</sup> Arne Næss, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, 178.

<sup>35</sup> Reed and Rothenberg, eds., *Wisdom in the Open Air*, 156.

<sup>36</sup> “Friluftsliv can help prevent a catastrophe by showing how its own values avoid the global collapse our modern society is heading for.” Faarlund, “A Way Home,” 167. It is interesting to note, here, that culture, to Faarlund, is merely a set of behaviors: “We can behave in a whole variety of ways in our home, and this behavior is what we call culture. And our present culture is on a collision course with nature.” Faarlund, “Touch the Earth,” 173.

<sup>37</sup> Gelter, “Friluftsliv,” 78.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Reed and Rothenberg, eds., *Wisdom in the Open Air*, 155.

<sup>41</sup> Faarlund, “A Way Home,” 168.

other and the Earth—innovative, yet tied to the past and the rhythm of their land.”<sup>42</sup> These thinkers coalesced around a shared interest for mountaineering, traditional lifeways, and philosophy. For Nina Witoszek, “It is difficult to imagine deep ecology being born in a latitude further South than Copenhagen.”<sup>43</sup> As it is, deep ecology emerged in Norway, within a cultural nexus and set of clear conceptions of “free nature” and the practice of “open air life.”

## The Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology

In the late 1970s, and particularly in the 1980s, a philosophy of “deep ecology” rapidly spread internationally, especially in The United States and Australia. This success was in no small part attributed to Bill Devall and George Sessions, who had been tireless advocates of the Næssian approach to ecological philosophy, and the new ecocentric outlook increasingly gained adherents in both academic and activist circles alike.<sup>44</sup>

The origin of the term stems from Arne Næss, who in 1972 made a distinction between the “shallow ecology” movement—which focused on resource depletion, pollution, and “the health and affluence of people in developed countries”—and the “deep ecology” movement that were were attentive to the “relational total-field image” and committed to “biospherical egalitarianism.”<sup>45</sup> Essentially, the distinction was between an anthropocentric and technocratic position on the one hand, and another that is based on “a deep-seated respect, or even veneration, for ways and forms of life.” For the deep, long-term ecology movement, “*the equal right to live and blossom*” were presented as “an intuitively clear and obvious value axiom.”<sup>46</sup>

In 1984, during a camping trip in Death Valley, Næss and Devall would draft a more definitive platform for the deep ecology movement.<sup>47</sup> This platform emphasized that the

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<sup>42</sup> Reed and Rothenberg, eds., *Wisdom in the Open Air*, 2. Oddly, here Reed and Rothenberg equates “deep ecology” with “thoughtful environmentalism.”

<sup>43</sup> Nina Witoszek, “Arne Næss and the Norwegian Nature Tradition,” 457.

<sup>44</sup> Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Layton: Gibbs Smith, 1985). The activist groups and movements were to a large extent inspired by the emergence of Earth First!, an organization Dave Foreman cofounded in 1980.

<sup>45</sup> Arne Næss launched the distinction at a Third World Futures conference in Bucarest in 1972, but these views were first published as “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements: A Summary,” *Inquiry*, No. 16 (1973). Næss’s “shallow/deep ecology distinction” were “largely unknown to people outside Scandinavia until the 1980s, when it began to receive widespread attention by philosophers and environmentalists.” Bill Devall, ed., *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century: Readings on the Philosophy and Practice of the New Environmentalism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), xii.

<sup>46</sup> Arne Næss, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements: A Summary,” republished in George Sessions, ed., *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century* (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), 151-155, emphasis in original.

<sup>47</sup> Arne Næss and George Sessions, “Basic Principles,” presented in Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology*, 70.

flourishing of all life, both human and non-human, had intrinsic value. The platform also declared that human interference with the natural world would only be justified “to satisfy vital needs,” and that the flourishing of nonhuman life requires a substantial decrease of the human population. The ideological change they envisioned would mainly be that of appreciating life quality, which they define as dwelling in situations of intrinsic value, instead of adhering to high standards of living.<sup>48</sup> As Næss often expressed it: deep ecology advanced solutions that were simple in means and rich in ends.

These richer, deeper ends were to be fleshed out by everyone through subjective outlooks, religions, and philosophies, as a myriad of individual “ecosophies.” An ecosophy is simply a comprehensive view concerning “wisdom in relation to the foundation of life on earth.”<sup>49</sup> As a result, “the deep ecology movement consists of just as many ecosophies as there are supporters.”<sup>50</sup> Næss called his own subjective approach to reality and values “ecosophy T,” which advanced a broadening of our “self-identification,” and claimed that the concept of “self-realization” was an ultimate value. I am aware that Næss did nuance his positions, in ways that I am not able to convey in these brief sections (For example Næss’s notion of “equal intrinsic value” became “some intrinsic value”). My intention here is not to provide any comprehensive criticism of either the deep ecology tradition or the main strands of ecocentrism; only to present the core components of an ecophilosophical outlook that differs markedly from social ecology, and whose concepts have shaped our assumptions and interpretations of “free nature.”

Næss claimed no originality to inventing deep ecology: he was merely putting a term on a movement that was already present, he said.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, much of Næss’s writings pivots around his attempts to convince others how their various philosophical, political, and religious views could be united under the rubric of deep ecology. His position was ecumenical and eclectic, something which tied neatly into his appraisals of pluralism and dialogue.

Næss kept insisting, however, that the main dividing lines of the environmental movement, were between the “shallow” and the “deep” approaches to ecology, which in turn greatly

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> “What is common to ecosophies is that their followers have a comprehensive view, and that the content of the particular ecosophy reveals that one is taking account of the environmental crisis that we feel is threatening.” Næss, *Life’s Philosophy*, 104, 107.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>51</sup> Although Næss would become aware of Rachel Carson’s work in 1967, he credited the emergence of deep ecology with the publication of her *Silent Spring* in 1962. David Rothenberg, *Is it Painful to Think? Conversations with Arne Næss* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 126-136.

reflected a way of thinking about nature: “When the environmental crisis was first seriously treated as a social and political problem in the 1960s, a divide in the view of Nature made its appearance,” Næss explains. “On the one hand there were those who considered that the value of Nature was exclusively to serve the ends of humankind in a narrow sense. On the other hand there were those who ascribed to Nature its own value, an intrinsic value, independent of the uses to which people wanted to put it.”<sup>52</sup>

This notion of nature corresponded broadly with Scandinavian notions of “free nature,” and, to a large extent, Næss expressed sentiments and values that were developed in the Norwegian post-war milieu of mountaineers that sought authentic encounters with nature “on its own terms.” For a long time, these ideas were largely unknown outside of Scandinavia, but by 1985, when Devall and Sessions published their highly influential *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, deep ecology’s international standing as a recognized and respected ecophilosophical tendency was definitively established.

## Social Ecology versus Deep Ecology

In 1987, in a keynote speech to the national gathering of the US Greens in Amherst, Massachusetts, American social ecologist Murray Bookchin confronted deep ecology head-on: Bookchin claimed that reactionary, antihumanist sentiments were brewing in the radical ecology movement, and he held deep ecology responsible for this development.<sup>53</sup> The polemic was spurred by an interview Devall, Næss’s close US associate, conducted with Dave Foreman from Earth First! In this interview, Foreman argued from a deep ecological perspective, apparently without Devall batting an eye, for letting nature takes its course through famines in Africa, and for harsh immigration policies on the US-Mexico border.<sup>54</sup>

The promotion of “biocentric egalitarianism” and simplistic mantras that “all life is One” was highly problematic, Bookchin contended, not only because it downplayed our distinctly

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<sup>52</sup> “We talk of a ‘feeling for Nature’ as an expression of different concepts. I will begin with a tentative definition: a feeling for Nature is a positive feeling for areas that are not obviously dominated by human activity. I insert the word *obviously* because we must admit that today all places on earth are affected by human beings, the Antarctic not excluded.” Næss, *Life’s Philosophy*, 105-106, emphasis in original. Although this formulation is plastic, it seems to me that these “areas that are not obviously dominated by human activity” refers to “free nature,” in the conventional Norwegian sense.

<sup>53</sup> Murray Bookchin, “Social Ecology versus Deep Ecology: A Challenge for the Ecology Movement,” *Green Perspectives*, No. 4-5 (Summer 1987). Bookchin’s major criticisms of deep ecology are found in *Remaking Society: Pathways to a Green Future* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1989), *Which Way for the Ecology Movement?* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1994), and, most notably, in *Re-Enchanting Humanity: A Defense of the Human Spirit Against Antihumanism, Misanthropy, Mysticism, and Primitivism* (London: Cassell, 1995). A dialogue between Dave Foreman and Murray Bookchin was published as *Defending the Earth*, edited by Steve Chase (Boston: South End Press, 1991).

<sup>54</sup> Bill Devall, “A Spanner in the Woods,” *Simple Living*, Vol 2, No. 12 (1987).

human qualities and responsibilities, but ignored hierarchies, classes, and very real clashes of interests *within* our societies. When, within a pluralist and eclectic deep ecology movement, misanthropic, antihumanist, and even openly racist statements were accepted without further ado, he claimed, this testified to the movement's intellectual, political, and moral bankruptcy.

Bookchin did not accept how deep ecologists held a vague "humanity" responsible for the ecological crisis. Was it really the case, he asked rhetorically, that disenfranchised, marginalized, and politically disempowered social groups were just as culpable as the heads of nation-states or large multinational corporations? In Bookchin's view, deep ecology was not only socially disinterested or inert, but bred an insensitivity toward human suffering. Even more, Bookchin insisted, there were *systemic* causes to the ecological crisis we face today—it is not *merely* a question of a new ecological consciousness, spiritual values, and individual lifestyles—and that its possible resolution also hinges on systemic solutions. Deep ecology's focus on "materialist culture," "technological society," "consumption" and the highly personalistic "deep" questions about how individuals relate to nature was not merely off the mark, he argued, but *deflects* our attention from the real issues the ecology movement must confront. "Despite all its social rhetoric," Bookchin insisted, deep ecology "has no sense that our ecological problems have their roots in society and in social problems."<sup>55</sup> For its vagaries and inconsistencies, and highly subjectivist approach to nourish "feelings for nature," Bookchin often called it *mystical* ecology. Indeed, deep ecology ought to be named "antisocial ecology," Janet Biehl suggests, "so greatly did it contrast with social ecology."<sup>56</sup>

Eventually, after a few years, the controversy with academic deep ecology petered out, but the conflict had whirled Bookchin into a series of polemics over the politics of ecology, which would continue with anarchists and primitivist activists throughout the 1990s.<sup>57</sup> Naess, and deep ecologists in general, were highly ecumenical and still sought to bring every intellectually affiliated tendency under the umbrella of deep ecology.<sup>58</sup> Curiously, in conversations with Rothenberg several years later, Naess reflects on the polemics in ways that shows that none of the fundamental issues that Bookchin raised were understood, much less

<sup>55</sup> Bookchin, "Social Ecology versus Deep Ecology."

<sup>56</sup> Janet Biehl, *Ecology or Catastrophe: The Life of Murray Bookchin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 263.

<sup>57</sup> Biehl, *Ecology or Catastrophe*. According to Andy Price, the early conflicts with deep ecology created a "Bookchin caricature" that would shape all subsequent polemics. See Andy Price, *Recovering Bookchin: Social Ecology and the Crises of Our Time* (Porsgrunn: New Compass, 2012), 7-64.

<sup>58</sup> Gjefsen tells us that some kind of truce in the international ecology movement was eventually accepted, "in great part due to Naess's authority." Gjefsen, *Arne Naess*, 321.

incorporated.<sup>59</sup> Næss's combination of simple principles that could encompass large sections of the radical ecology movement (the platform), while reserving the more difficult theses for a highly subjectivist philosophy (Ecosophy T), was a shrewd move. Bookchin, by contrast, had an intransigent insistence on "theoretical coherence" and "political consistency," a policy that certainly demanded much of his followers and opponents alike. Although the deep ecology movement became more circumspect about controversial social issues, it never adopted any consistent social analyses.

It is not my intention, here, to revive a thirty-year-old intellectual feud, but I want point out that Bookchin did not criticize some fringe phenomena of the margins of the deep ecology movement: the polemic reflected real intellectual and political differences regarding how we interpret nature, how we understand the ecological crisis, and how we hope to harmonize society with natural world.<sup>60</sup> The problems were not limited to explicit instances of racism, right-wing politics, and white privilege. The problems, as Bookchin would argue, ran much deeper. In particular, he challenged deep ecology's notions of biospheric egalitarianism, the intrinsic worth of all beings, a limitless self-identification, and biocentric reductionism; practically all of deep ecology's basic assumptions had, according to Bookchin, sinister ecological, as well as social, overtones.<sup>61</sup>

As Bookchin saw it, deep ecology's reductionism and misanthropy stemmed from a broader cultural malaise. "Of the greatest importance to deep ecology's rise—far greater than Sessions' and Devall's efforts in promoting it—was the ideological climate that followed the decline of

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<sup>59</sup> Rothenberg, *Is it Painful to Think?*, 126-151. Næss did not want to let the issues that concern the Green movement, of which deep ecology plays one part, overlap with the issues that the social justice movement and the peace movement raised, although he obviously and unconditionally recognized the importance of each of these movements. The observations Næss makes in this book, however, reveal how far social and deep ecology are from each other; although Næss is much more sensitive to social issues than Rothenberg, who argues that "the deep ecology movement is never going to be about everything. It's not good to claim to solve all problems. People who are attracted to it are those who care to preserve nature, for whatever reason. Either they like to go outside and walk in the wilderness, or maybe they're scientists and recognize the grave danger that we are in. It's not a movement that is going to attract everyone. *It's not really about saving the world.* It's about a limited thing, and I think that is important to realize. It's not really concerned with development problems. *Its primary aim is to preserve nature for those who perceive that nature is important.*" To which Næss adds, "Free nature for meditation and contemplation." (145, emphasis added.)

<sup>60</sup> For a full assessment of the arguments from a social ecology perspective, see Price, *Recovering Bookchin*; see also Brian Morris, *Pioneers of Ecological Humanism* (Brighton: Book Guild, 2012), 208-259.

<sup>61</sup> The point, as I see it, is not that deep ecology *by definition* is reactionary: deep ecologists are often, like Næss, promoting a range of progressive social causes. The problem rather concerns the fact that deep ecology possesses *no intellectual bulwarks* against a reactionary political agenda. For a critique of deep ecology's relationship to the political right, see Peter Zegers, "The Dark Side of Political Ecology," *Communalism*, No. 3 (December 2002).



the New Left, a climate that favored intuitive and mystical notions.”<sup>62</sup> The ecological crisis, Bookchin insisted, required coherent, secular, and radical responses.

## The Concept of Social Ecology

“As one of the first of radical environmentalists,” Roderick Nash explains, Bookchin “has few equals” for the time “spent in the trenches of radical environmental theory.”<sup>63</sup> Bookchin had been writing on ecological issues during the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>64</sup> Early on, Bookchin would on draw a sharp distinction between environmentalism and ecology.<sup>65</sup> The core idea was that the environmental crisis requires “a fundamental, indeed revolutionary, reconstitution of society along ecological lines,” Nash tells us. “It was from this perspective that Bookchin, like the deep ecologists whom he anticipated, criticized most manifestations of American conservation and even large parts of modern environmentalism.”<sup>66</sup>

The first comprehensive declaration of social ecology came with Bookchin’s 1964 essay, “Ecology and Revolutionary Thought.”<sup>67</sup> Here, Bookchin heralded the radical message of ecology. Its social significance, he predicted, would be comparable to the Copernican revolution, and ultimately shape how we envisioned the future of our societies—indeed whether our societies would have any future at all. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Bookchin would explain the implications of a social ecology in a series of essays on technology, city planning, and energy policy, as well on radical theory and community politics.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>62</sup> For Bookchin, the “antihumanism, mysticism, and misanthropy that are now sediment into present-day culture have long roots in the social decay of our time. Deep ecology is a symptom of that decay even more than it is one of its causes.” Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 92, 93.

<sup>63</sup> Roderick Frazier Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 164, 165.

<sup>64</sup> His most important work from the early years, *Our Synthetic Environment*, was published under the pseudonym Lewis Herber: Murray Bookchin, *Our Synthetic Environment* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962). This book was published half a year before Carson’s bestselling *Silent Spring*. For insights into the relationship between Bookchin and Carson’s popularity and ideas, see Yaakov Garb, “Change and Continuity in Environmental World-View: The Politics of Nature in Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*,” in David Macauley, ed., *Minding Nature: The Philosophers of Ecology* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996), pp. 229–56. *Our Synthetic Environment*, Garb explains, was “a much more comprehensive, multidimensional, and above all politically far-reaching work” (p. 246).

<sup>65</sup> In November 1971, in a lecture “On Spontaneity and Organization,” delivered at *Telos* conference in Buffalo, Bookchin first made the distinction between environmentalism and ecology. His distinction was advanced a year before Næss’s somewhat similar distinction between “shallow” and “deep” ecology. The essay was published in *Anarchos*, No. 4 (1972), and republished in Murray Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1980), 251–274.

<sup>66</sup> Nash, *Rights of Nature*, 164, 165.

<sup>67</sup> Murray Bookchin, “Ecology and Revolutionary Thought,” in Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (1973; Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1986).

<sup>68</sup> His essays from the mid-1960s onward were collected in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (1973); His essays from the 1970s were collected in *Toward an Ecological Society* (1980).

Social ecology has no established eight-point platform, but here at the outset, I will offer the following points as a minimal definition of what Bookchin's social ecology entails. First, social ecology insists that is impossible to separate humanity from the natural world. When E. A. Gutkind introduced the term "social ecology" in his works in the early 1950s, it was meant to stress "the indivisibility of man's interaction with his environment."<sup>69</sup> Human beings do not exist outside of nature, in a realm entirely on their own, but develop cultures within the larger world of nature. Diversity was seen as a social and natural good. Over time, Bookchin would radicalize these notions of integration, diversity, and balance. Humanity and our societies, Bookchin insisted, *always* have an ecological context, and we must find ways of balancing our interactions with the natural world.

Furthermore, instead of focusing on philosophical or religious causes alone, as deep ecologists tend to do, Bookchin insisted on a trenching *social* critique, which brings us to the next point: "Social ecology is based on the conviction that nearly all of our present ecological problems originate in deep-seated social problems." Indeed, social ecology claims that current ecological problems reveal deeper *systematic* crises. It follows from this view, Bookchin continues, that these "ecological problems cannot be understood, let alone solved, without a careful understanding of existing society and the irrationalities that dominate it."<sup>70</sup>

Social domination, oppression, and exploitation, Bookchin argues, are intimately linked to our attempts to dominate and exploit the natural world. As is manifest throughout Bookchin's writings, social ecology emphasizes how "ecological degradation is, in great part, a product of the degradation of human beings by hunger, material insecurity, class rule, hierarchical domination, patriarchy, ethnic discrimination, and competition."<sup>71</sup> Not only does Bookchin insist that all ecological problems are essentially social, but he argues that the domination and exploitation of nature mirrors a society founded on human oppression and exploitation: humanity's attempts to dominate the natural world, indeed the very *idea* of domination, Bookchin maintains, will not end until we have removed hierarchies and dominations from the social condition.

This analysis leads Bookchin to advance a radical social agenda, based on decentralization of power and the transition from a market-based economy to a form of democratic

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<sup>69</sup> Erwin Anton Gutkind, *Community and Environment: A Discourse on Social Ecology* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), 47, 50, 81; See also Janet Biehl, *Mumfurd, Gutkind, Bookchin: The Emergence of Eco-Decentralism* (Porsgrunn: New Compass, 2011).

<sup>70</sup> Murray Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism*, edited by Eirik Eiglad (San Francisco: AK Press, 2006), 19.

<sup>71</sup> Bookchin, *Which Way for the Ecology Movement?*, 17.

collectivism. In short, Bookchin argues, to re-harmonize humanity's relationship with the natural world, we have to create *an ecological society*.<sup>72</sup> In addition to these points, it should also be mentioned that social ecology insists on a *naturalist* interpretation of the world, and a secular social order. More fundamentally, social ecology also suggests that humanity actually has the potential to become "nature rendered self-conscious," however dimly these prospects seem today. Indeed, social ecology is founded on the premise that human beings *can* create a free society in harmony with nature.

Here, for the purposes of our discussion, I have only provided a brief overview to some of social ecology's central theses. We will have the opportunity to explore and evaluate all these aspects in the forthcoming chapters.

## A Basic Overview of this Thesis

In this thesis, I set out to explore the concept of "free nature" in Murray Bookchin's philosophy of social ecology. This chapter is meant to situate these ideas in a broader cultural and philosophical context; in particular, to help us contrast Bookchin's ideas with Scandinavian notions of free nature and the philosophical foundations of deep ecology. This sharp relief, I hope, will help illuminate just what social ecology promises through its hopes and struggles for attaining a "free nature."

In Chapter Two, "Toward a Philosophy of Nature," I will explore the basic philosophical concepts that animate the philosophy of social ecology. I will be looking at how "first nature" and "second nature" are defined, how they are related, and briefly touch upon how they can be transcended in a "free nature." To do this, I will look at how Bookchin understands the significance of life as a phenomenon, on the relationships between organisms and their environment, and on the philosophical relationship between biology and ecology. I will seek to explain both the naturalist and the dialectical components of dialectical naturalism, which was the term Bookchin chose to describe his philosophy of social ecology. Broadly speaking, this philosophy presents nature *as* evolution: as a cumulative development toward ever greater differentiation, complexity, and subjectivity in the realm of life, of which human society constitutes a distinct, but no less natural, realm.

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<sup>72</sup> This, I can add, is of course not a question of straightforward causality: it is only a *necessary* factor, not a *sufficient* one. Social ecology has insistently called for a new ethics, and a new sensibility toward the natural world, but these changes, Bookchin argues, must be linked to a fundamental restructuring of our societies: politically, socially, and economically—as well as culturally.

In Chapter Three, “Society Against Nature,” I will turn to Bookchin’s social and historical analyses of how society came to be ecologically destructive. I will look deeper into where the idea of dominating nature stems from, and distinguish the concepts of hierarchy and complementarity in our interpretations of the natural world. I will put special emphasis on Bookchin’s account of the emergence of hierarchy within early human communities.

Thereafter, I will situate social ecology’s foundational thesis, which insists that the very idea of dominating nature stems from social domination, within broader intellectual traditions, to show the originality of Bookchin’s analyses as well as the extent to which they would lead to radical social conclusions.

In Chapter Four, “An Ecological Society,” I will explore Bookchin’s visions of an ecological society, which is, I will argue, essentially what social ecology’s notion of free nature refers to: a tangible vision of creating ecological communities. For social ecology, freedom is intrinsically linked to increasing degrees of consciousness, rationality, and, ultimately, ethics, with the concept spurring civic engagement. These distinct political ideas all tie directly into Bookchin’s broader philosophical analyses and his speculations about the possibility of humanity becoming “nature rendered self-conscious.”

But first, let us turn to Bookchin’s broader philosophical analyses. What is unique about social ecology? How is society related to nature? And what is the significance of ecology and evolution for our philosophy?

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*The increase in diversity in the biosphere opens new evolutionary pathways, indeed, alternative evolutionary directions, in which species play an active role in their own survival and change.*<sup>1</sup>

# Toward a Philosophy of Nature

“Nature” is not only one of the most controversial terms in the history of philosophy; it is also one of the most complex words that exists.<sup>2</sup> Still, every ecological philosophy, by definition, must start out from an interpretation of what nature is, how it has come to be the way it is, and what our role in the natural world is. This, I believe, is an ontological and epistemological premise for which all forms of ecological philosophy must account.

As a concept, “nature” has largely been shaped in opposition to “culture.” This distinction is not simply an ideation of the concept, but has historically served as a justification for our attempts to “dominate” and exploit nature. The notion that human societies are somehow “outside nature” or even “above nature” stems from a deepseated dualist mindset, which counterposes mind to body, idea to reality, and society to nature. Ecological thought has, to a great extent, been shaped by its attempts to remedy this age-old problem of dualism. But these attempts, in turn, have often been marred by reductionism.<sup>3</sup> Bookchin was troubled by how deep ecologists sought to overcome the problem of dualism by adopting various forms of

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<sup>1</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 77-78, emphases in original.

<sup>2</sup> Kate Soper, *What is Nature?* (Malden: Blackwell, 1995), 1-14; Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 1-36.

<sup>3</sup> Soper, *What is Nature?*, 15-70, 149-179; Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 7-39.

monism, often imported from Eastern mystical traditions.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Bookchin argued that reductionism was a more serious problem for ecological philosophy than was classical dualism.<sup>5</sup>

## The Realms of Nature

Let us now have a closer look at social ecology's appreciation of nature. To be sure, Bookchin recognized that nature in its broadest sense "encompasses everything around us, from the organic beings that we normally designate as 'natural' to the lifeless moon that appears on relatively cloudless nights—that is, the totality of Being."<sup>6</sup> Still, once we start to use the word nature in a more specific sense, he insisted, we should precisely describe what *aspect* of "nature" we are talking about. In particular, Bookchin distinguished between a "first nature" and a "second nature."

Insofar as nature "includes the biological realm of animality that precedes the emergence of society, we are obliged" to speak of "biological evolution as 'first nature' and social evolution as 'second nature.'"<sup>7</sup> This distinction is not a dichotomy. By "first nature," then, Bookchin refers to the cumulative evolution of the natural world, especially the organic world. The biosphere, where these evolutionary processes occur, reaches from the earth's crust, to the thin layer where most of *life* resides, and into the depths of the oceans and caves—even into the stratosphere. Importantly, for Bookchin, nature is not simply everything that is "out there," but the *history* of that development, that is to say, its evolution. "The thrust of biotic evolution over great eras of organic evolution has been toward the increasing diversification of species and their interlocking into complex, basically mutualistic relationships, without which the widespread colonization of the planet by life would have been impossible."<sup>8</sup> It is "this relatively unconscious natural development" that Bookchin terms "first nature."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bookchin suggested we look to the Western organismic tradition, which "is much sturdier in its thrust than the Eastern," Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 99. Bookchin's unpublished *The Politics of Cosmology* traces the roots of this organismic tradition in Western thought. For an overview of the related traditions of philosophical vitalism, see Lawrence Cahoon, *The Orders of Nature* (New York: SUNY Press, 2013); and R.G. Collingwood's succinct *The Idea of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 133-141, 175-173.

<sup>5</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 105.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>7</sup> Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 58.

<sup>9</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 29-30.

“This first nature exists in both continuity *and* discontinuity with ‘second nature,’ or the evolution of society.”<sup>10</sup> We cannot deny that this “first nature” still resides in us: as biological beings we constantly need to exchange energy and material with our surroundings through metabolism. Even the inorganic obviously remains integral to our being: not only do our endoskeletons consist of mineralized tissue, but we still need our daily supply of minerals for our bodies to function properly. We cannot escape this evolutionary heritage.

“Human biology is rooted in an evolutionary elaboration of a specialized physical system—the nervous system,” Bookchin explains, “as well as a variety of anatomical attributes (stereoscopic vision, free forearms, opposable thumbs, and an oral flexibility in producing complex sounds) that have made it possible for our species to advance from adaptive behavior to innovative behavior.”<sup>11</sup> Even our most valued human attributes, such as will or reason, however, are not *sui generis*. “They have their origins in the growing choices conferred by complexity and in the alternative pathways opened up by the growth of complex ecocommunities and the development of increasingly complex neurological systems—in short, processes that are both internal and external to life-forms.”<sup>12</sup> “This breach,” Bookchin continues, “is, above all, the consequence of potentialities that are latent in the evolution of life itself.”<sup>13</sup>

We are not only biological beings, however, and although Bookchin recognized the anatomical and biological characteristics of our human constitution, he emphasized that our uniquely creative human capacities are linked to the emergence of culture.<sup>14</sup> Through culture, human beings have come to possess “abilities no other life form has equal in kind.”<sup>15</sup> Human beings have their roots in biological evolution, and retain both external and internal ties to natural history, but are still a unique result of that history; yet for Bookchin, it is precisely the unfolding of potentialities in natural evolution that “yielded the creation of a predominantly cultural evolution, or second nature.” In other words: not only are human beings a result of the long evolutionary history of the natural world, but it is “nature itself” that “provides the ground for the emergence of society.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., xi, emphasis in original.

<sup>11</sup> Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 234.

<sup>12</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 81.

<sup>13</sup> Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 234.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>16</sup> Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 16.

Bookchin traces this distinction between a “first” and “second” nature back to the Roman orator Cicero.<sup>17</sup> In *De Natura Deorum*, from about 45 BCE, Cicero wrote that “by the work of our hands we strive to create a sort of second nature within the world of nature.”<sup>18</sup> What is important to note here, Bookchin urged, is the idea that we create a social world *within* the natural world.<sup>19</sup>

“Looking back in time,” Bookchin wrote, “we find that the history of society deliciously grades out of the history of life without either being subsumed by the other.”<sup>20</sup> While we wish to recognize humanity’s filiations with its organic evolution, we must be able to explain how second nature evolved from, yet still includes, first nature. More specifically, “First and second nature—the biological and the social—form a richly differentiated *continuum* in which second nature emerges from first. While each interacts with the other, second nature marked a transcendence of first nature, a sublation of an adaptive animality to an innovative humanity.”<sup>21</sup>

I will not evaluate whether this distinction between first and second nature is adequate. Suffice to say that they demonstrate how important it was for Bookchin to overcome dualism *as well as* reductionism. I believe he attained this achievement. For Bookchin, although dualism should be consistently challenged, it was imperative that we did not dissolve the very real qualitative distinctions between human and non-human life-forms in what he called “a reductionist quagmire.”<sup>22</sup> These distinctions become all the more important in relief to deep ecology’s more cosmic formulas, such as “all life is one” or “everything is connected.”<sup>23</sup> For

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<sup>17</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 29-30; *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 16, 18; *Remaking Society*, 25; *Urbanization Without Cities: The Rise and Decline of Citizenship* (Montreal: Black Rose Books), xiv.

<sup>18</sup> Cicero, it should be noted, spoke primarily of humanity’s creative interaction with the natural world, not the creation of human culture as such: “we sow cereals and plant trees; we irrigate our lands to fertilize them. We fortify river-banks, and straighten or divert the courses of rivers. In short, by the work of our hands we strive to create a sort of second nature within the world of nature.” Marcus Tullius Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 102. I will not, here, discuss how Cicero’s treatise argues that “everything that there is in this universe, everything of which men make use, was made and prepared for the sake of men,” and that “all dominion, too, over the earth’s resources belong to man.” (LX, LXI).

<sup>19</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 29-30; *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 18; *Urbanization Without Cities*, xiv; *Remaking Society*, 25-26.

<sup>20</sup> Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 18, emphasis added.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. “Dualism, in all its forms,” Bookchin warned, “has opposed these two natures to each other, as antagonists. Monism, in turn, often dissolves one into the other.” Bookchin scolded anthropocentrism and biocentrism and claimed that these “ideologies differ primarily in whether they want to dissolve first nature into second or second nature into first.” Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 119.

<sup>23</sup> Bookchin railed against what he termed a reductionist fallacy, which is “the application of the most general formulas to the most detailed particulars, in the belief that what is universal and seemingly all-encompassing must necessarily explain what is highly particular and uniquely individual. At best, a formula, a ‘paradigm,’ or more properly, a philosophy, may provide the basis for an orientation toward reality at a clearly definable level of reality. Ironically, the more universal,



Bookchin, a crucial role of ecology is to understand the *interaction* between various ecosystems and human agency. “To explore these differentia, to examine the phases and interfaces that enter into their making and into humanity’s long development from animality to society,” a development that Bookchin recognized is latent with both problems and possibilities, “is to make social ecology one of the most powerful disciplines from which to draw our critique of the present social order.”<sup>24</sup> The fact that “both first and second nature exist and can never be dualized into ‘parallels’ or simplistically reduced to each other” accounts in great part for Bookchin’s phrase *social ecology*.<sup>25</sup>

By *social ecology*, Bookchin meant “to emphasize that we can no more separate society from nature than we can separate mind from body.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed, social ecology seeks “to understand the place of humanity in the natural world and the social factors that must be present if we are to actualize our ability (as yet incomplete) to bring to bear, in all the affairs of ‘raw’ or first nature, a ‘sophisticated’ or second nature informed by reason.”<sup>27</sup> This analysis points to how Bookchin hoped our society could transcend today’s antagonistic relationship to the natural world and embody what Bookchin called a “free nature.”

In any case, Bookchin concluded, “there is no road back from second to first nature,” just as there is no way “second nature *as it is now constituted* can rescue the biosphere from destruction with ‘technological fixes’ and political reforms.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, to resolve the essential paradox of human existence, which is that we “are *of* the biotic world as organisms, mammals and primates,” yet we “are also *apart* from it as creatures that produce a vast array of cultural artefacts and associations,” the only option for Bookchin was to explore “how a truly free society, based on ecological principles, could mediate humanity’s relationship with nature.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, by combining the words *ecology* and *freedom* in his works, Bookchin meant to “show that neither nature nor reason could be properly conceptualized independently of the other; that the natural world could not be given any meaning without the social world or the

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abstract, and mathematical a formula is, the more likely that its very generality will limit it when it is applied to concrete, highly particularized phenomena.  $E=mc^2$  is *too* cosmic to explain such richly articulated or mediated modes of reality as natural evolution, organic metabolism, social development, and personal behavior.” Ibid., 110.

<sup>24</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 86-87.

<sup>25</sup> Additionally, as we will see, “social ecology has the special meaning that the ecological crisis that beleaguers us stems from a social crisis, a crisis that the crude biologism of ‘deep ecology’ generally ignores. Still further, that the resolution of this social crisis can only be achieved by reorganizing society along rational lines, imbued with an ecological philosophy and sensibility.” Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 120, emphasis in original.

<sup>26</sup> Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 16.

<sup>27</sup> Bookchin, *Free Cities*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 131, emphasis added.

<sup>29</sup> Bookchin, *Our Synthetic Environment*, xxiv; Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 66.

human mind, that is, without the ability to abstract experience and generalize facts into far-reaching insights.”<sup>30</sup> Free nature in this sense would be an ecological society, where human beings add a dimension of ecological consciousness and reason to nature, thereby integrating ethics with evolution.

## Participatory Evolution

Bookchin explicitly places his naturalist philosophy within the organismic tradition in Western thought. In a recent study, Brian Morris suggests that Bookchin downplays his legacy to Darwin.<sup>31</sup> In a very real sense, everyone born after 1859 is indebted to Darwin for completely rewriting the “The Book of Nature,” but it is worth noting some of the more problematic aspects of Darwin’s exposition of natural selection: they will help clarify the philosophical premises of social ecology.<sup>32</sup>

“In the Darwinian struggle for survival with its emphasis on adaptation,” Bookchin explains, “life is reactive rather than active.”<sup>33</sup> According to Bookchin, “the evolution of living beings is no mere passive process, the product of exclusively chance conjunctions between random genetic changes and ‘selective’ environmental ‘forces,’ and that the ‘origin of species’ is no mere result of external influences that determine the ‘fitness’ of a life-form to ‘survive’ as a result of random factors in which life is simply an ‘object’ of an indeterminable ‘selective’ process.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, “natural selection merely tells us that the ‘fittest’ survive environmental changes,” but “if all we know about evolutionary development is that amidst a flurry of utterly random mutations, the organisms that are capable of surviving are those that are the ‘fittest’ to survive—a circular thesis—then we know very little about evolution indeed.”<sup>35</sup>

Bookchin chose another approach, which “is somewhat at odds with the prevalent Darwinian or neo-Darwinian syntheses, in which nonhuman life-forms are primarily ‘objects’

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<sup>30</sup> Bookchin, *Free Cities*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Morris, *Pioneers of Ecological Humanism*, 172, 239.

<sup>32</sup> Evolutionary theory certainly has been nuanced over the last 150 years, yet many of its basic assumptions have prevailed through social-Darwinism, sociobiology, and mechanistic systems theory, with sinister ideological results. For an excellent contemporary exposition, see, for example, Jerry A. Coyne, *Why Evolution is True* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) and Carl Zimmer, *Evolution: Triumph of an Idea* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002).

<sup>33</sup> In Darwin’s account, “the evolution of living things is seen largely as an interplay between ‘objects’ and ‘forces,’ ‘struggle’ and ‘competition,’ geological upheavals and population pressure. Despite Darwin’s personal ethical proclivities and his sober Victorian morality, nature enters into his custody as a mechanical, almost inorganic terrain for the interplay of compelling ‘laws’ and ‘brutish’ conflicts.” Bookchin, *The Politics of Cosmology*, 7, 8.

<sup>34</sup> “Ecologists, like biologists, have yet to come to terms with the notion that symbiosis (not only ‘struggle’) and participation (not only ‘competition’) factor in the evolution of species.” *Ibid.*, 77, 78.

<sup>35</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 54.

of selective forces exogenous to them.”<sup>36</sup> Bookchin called his perspective “*participatory* evolution.” This approach does *not* imply any rejection of Darwin’s theory of natural selection, but does enact a fundamental shift of emphasis. Bookchin downplayed the external selective factors with which Darwinians describe evolution, in order to emphasize the tendency of life toward a greater complexity of *selfhood*. Evolution displays a tendency that yields increasing degrees of subjectivity, and this constitutes the internal or immanent impulse of evolution toward growing self-awareness.<sup>37</sup>

Here, Bookchin echoes Hans Jonas, whose 1966 work, *The Phenomenon of Life*, had offered “an ‘existential’ interpretation of biological facts.”<sup>38</sup> In Jonas’s account, all biological organisms are concerned with their own being, as they struggle to maintain their own existence, and assert themselves as nascent subjects. Jonas described this as the “inwardness of life.” As Jonas strove to find some unifying principles capable of explaining both the most complex forms of life as well as the simplest unicellular organisms, he came to recognize that even the “amoeba is part of the universe and must be accountable for by its creative principle.”<sup>39</sup>

This inwardness of life was not recognized by theories of “natural selection.” Interestingly, Jonas holds the breakthrough of Darwinism and its evolutionary perspectives responsible for the definitive ascendancy of dualism and mechanism. Evolution was redefined, Jonas argued, as it was taken away from the organism and became a scheme for organizing the emergence of life forms in an entirely mechanical manner. This mechanization of the world could only succeed by “*abandoning* the original meaning of the term ‘evolution,’ derived from the growth process of individual organisms,” Jonas lamented: “the idea of performation and unfolding was abandoned and replaced by the quasi-mechanical picture of an unplanned, undirected, yet progressive sequence whose beginnings, unlike the germ, adumbrate nothing of the outcome or of the successive steps.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>38</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (1966; Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), xxiii.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>40</sup> Jonas pointed out how “the term ‘evolution’ denoted originally just this phenomenon of individual genesis, and by no means the genesis of species.” For Jonas, this was a fundamental problem. Ibid., 42, 43, emphasis in original. Although Bookchin shares Jonas’s concern about the lack of understanding of organisms and their self-directiveness, this to him would only be one aspect of the problem, and Bookchin’s dialectical holism would balance the organisms, the species, their interrelations, and their ecosystems into demarcated, yet ever-expanding wholes.

“At all events,” Jonas explains, “the teleological structure and behavior of organism is not just an alternative choice of description: it is, in the evidence of each one’s organic awareness, the external manifestation of the inwardness of substance.”<sup>41</sup> According to Jonas, biology teaches us that “there is no organism without teleology; there is no teleology without inwardness; and: life can be known only by life.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, according to Jonas, “the essence of reality reveals itself most completely in the organic components of the organism.”<sup>43</sup> It is worth noting that since *mind* can be located within organic existence from its very beginnings, which Jonas claims, then *freedom* can too. For Jonas, the very process of metabolism, even at the basic level of all organic existence, exhibits nascent forms of freedom: metabolism “is itself the first form of freedom.”<sup>44</sup> Bookchin would disagree with this specific interpretation of life as *teleological*, as this seems to imply some preordained telos, while Bookchin celebrated the creative and open-ended evolution that results from the contextual spontaneity of organisms. For this reason, he would prefer to describe this internal, perfective urge as *nisus*, a remarkable word that describes mental or physical efforts to attain an end. He would also disprove of the attempts to explain life by biology alone, and, as we shall see later, the attempt to structure a philosophy around existentialism.

Bookchin credited Darwin for bringing “a profound evolutionary sensibility to the ‘origin of species,’ but in the minds of his acolytes, species still stood somewhere between inorganic machines and mechanically functioning organisms.”<sup>45</sup> This, Bookchin argued, stemmed from the fact that “Darwin did not fully organicize evolutionary theory.”<sup>46</sup> Here, Bookchin lauded Diderot, who proposed that there was a “crucial trait of nature that transforms mere motion into development and directiveness: the notion of *sensibilité*, an internal *nisus*.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Diderot’s “*sensibilité* implies an active concept of matter that yields increasing complexity, from the atomic level to the brain.”<sup>48</sup> Continuity is preserved in this development without

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. Reality reveals itself “not in the atom, not in the molecule, not in the crystal, also not in the planets, suns, and so forth, but in the living organism, which is indubitably a body, but harbors something more than the silent being of matter.” That is to say that when we disavow the organism’s *self*-assertion and *self*-development, we waiver the intelligibility of *life*, and render the world unintelligible in the process. The problem of life, which for Jonas was centered in the problem of the body, was therefore a cardinal theme for his ontology. “Only from this starting point is it possible to develop a theory of being.” Hans Jonas, *Memoirs*, edited by Christian Wiese (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2008), 198; Jonas, *Phenomenon of Life*, 19, emphases in original.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>45</sup> “No less significant are the empirical origins of Darwin’s own work, which are deeply rooted in the Lockean atomism that nourished nineteenth-century British science as a whole.” Ibid. See also Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 159-176.

<sup>46</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 79-80.

<sup>47</sup> This *sensibilité* is often is translated into English as “sensitivity.” Ibid., 56-57.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

recourse to reductionism: in Diderot's dynamic *scala naturae* "there is a *nisus* for complexity, an *entelechia* that emerges from the very nature, structure, and form of potentiality *itself*, given varying degrees of the organization of 'matter.'" <sup>49</sup> In various ways for various organisms, Diderot explains, this *sensibilité* is expressed through potentialities, self-actualization, and emergent form.

Furthermore, Bookchin suggested that *The Origin of Species* ought to be read as the evolution of ecocommunities as well as the evolution of species. <sup>50</sup> From an *ecological* conception of evolution, nature consists of *ensembles* of species that alter the environments they participate in, and are thus able to exercise an increasingly *active* role in their own evolution. Indeed, Bookchin insisted, "placing the community in the foreground of evolution does not deny the integrity of species, their capacity for variation, or their unique lines of development." On the contrary, in such an account, "species become vital participants in their own evolution—active beings, not merely passive components—taking full account of their nascent freedom in the natural process." <sup>51</sup> Life then "ceases to be the passive *tabula rasa* on which eternal forces which we loosely call 'the environment' inscribe the destiny of 'a species,' an atomistic term that is meaningless outside the context of an ecosystem within which a life-form is truly definable with respect to other species." <sup>52</sup>

To this end, Bookchin favorably quoted William Trager, whose work on symbiosis stated that "mutual cooperation between organisms—symbiosis—is just as important, and that the 'fittest' may be the one that helps another to survive." <sup>53</sup> Insights into mutualism and symbiosis led Bookchin to "explore an ecological notion of natural evolution based on the development of *ecosystems*, not merely individual species." <sup>54</sup>

<sup>49</sup> "This immanent fecundity of 'matter'" that Diderot advanced, enthused Bookchin, "scored a marked advance over the prevalent mechanism of La Mettrie and, by common acknowledgment, anticipated nineteenth-century theories of evolution and, in my view, recent developments in biology." Ibid, emphases in original.

<sup>50</sup> "Allowing for the nuances that appear in all great books," Bookchin contended, "*The Origin of Species* accounts for the way in which *individual* species originate, evolve, adapt, survive, change, or pay the penalty of extinction as if they were fairly isolated from their environment. In that account, any one species stands for the world of life as a whole, in isolation from the life-forms that normally interact with it and with which it is interdependent. Although predators depend upon their prey, to be sure, Darwin portrays the strand from ancestor to descendant in lofty isolation, such that early *ehippus* rises, step by step, from its plebeian estate to attain the aristocratic grandeur of a sleek race horse. The paleontological diagramming of bones from former "missing links" to the culminating beauty of *Equus caballus* more closely resembles the adaptation of Robinson Crusoe from an English seafarer to a self-sufficient island dweller than the reality of a truly emerging being." Ibid., 80, emphases in original.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>52</sup> Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 57.

<sup>53</sup> Trager quoted in *ibid.*, 56-57.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

“As ecosystems become more complex and open to a greater variety of evolutionary pathways, due to their own richness of diversity and increasingly flexible forms of organic life,” Bookchin explains, “it is not only the environment that ‘chooses’ what ‘species’ are ‘fit’ to survive but species themselves, in mutualistic complexes as well as singly, that introduce a dim element of ‘choice,’” although “by no means ‘intersubjective’ or ‘willful’ in the *human* meaning of these terms.”<sup>55</sup>

Furthermore, “To speak of evolution in very broad terms tends to conceal the specific evolutionary *processes* that make up the overall process,” Bookchin warns: “Many anatomical lines of evolution have occurred: the evolution of the various organs that freed life-forms from their aquatic milieu; of eyes and ears, which sophisticated their awareness of the surrounding environment; and of the nervous system, from nerve networks to brains.”<sup>56</sup> It is clear in this sense that the “mind too has its evolutionary history in the natural world, and as the neurological capability of life-forms to function more actively and flexibly increases, so too does life itself help create new evolutionary directions that lead to enhanced self-awareness and self-activity. Selfhood appears germinally in the communities that life-forms establish as *active agents in their own evolution*, contrary to conventional evolutionary theory.”<sup>57</sup> This, then, is the core message of social ecology’s notion of participatory evolution.

In this sense, “natural evolution is a *cumulative* evolution toward ever more varied, differentiated, and complex forms and relationships.”<sup>58</sup> Still, these developments are not predetermined: “With variety, differentiation, and complexity, nature, in the course of its own unfolding, opens new directions for still further development along alternative lines of natural evolution.”<sup>59</sup> In other words, “nature’s fecundity rests on the existence of chance, indeed variety, as a *precondition* for complexity in organisms and ecosystems” and “by virtue of that fecundity, for the emergence of humanity from potentialities that involve increasing subjectivity.”<sup>60</sup> The process, Bookchin insists, is open-ended and intensely shaped by its participants. “However nascent, choice is not totally absent from biotic evolution; indeed, it increases as species become structurally, physiologically, and above all neurologically more complex.”<sup>61</sup> That is, to “the degree that animals become complex, self-aware, and increasingly

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 81, emphasis in original.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., emphasis in original.

<sup>58</sup> Bookchin, *Remaking society*, 36.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 36-37.

<sup>60</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 29, emphasis in original.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 77-78.

intelligent,” he continues, “they begin to make those elementary choices that influence their own evolution. They are less and less the passive objects of ‘natural selection’ and more and more the active subjects of their own development.”<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, as the ecological contexts within which species evolve, that is to say, the communities and interactions they form become more complex. “They open new avenues for evolution and a greater ability of life-forms to act self-selectively, forming the bases for some kind of choice, favoring precisely those species that can participate in ever-greater degrees in their own evolution, basically in the direction of greater complexity.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed, he maintains, “species and the ecocommunities in which they interact to create more complex forms of evolutionary development are increasingly the very ‘forces’ that account for evolution as a whole.”<sup>64</sup>

In other words, for Bookchin, evolutionary thinking should be able to process both a single organism’s striving for self-maintenance—the “inwardness of life”—as well as the biosystemic nexus in which species and organisms shape a common “ecological community.” Indeed, “*Life*,” Bookchin concludes, “*is active, interactive, procreative, relational, and contextual.*”<sup>65</sup>

In sum, then, social ecologists “see nature as essentially creative, directive, mutualistic, fecund, and marked by complementarity.”<sup>66</sup> The principles of social ecology, then, are “structured around participation and differentiation”<sup>67</sup> Indeed, social ecology “is largely a *philosophy of participation* in the broadest sense of the word,” Bookchin claims: “this philosophy sees ecocommunities as participatory communities.”<sup>68</sup> But before we can evaluate the social implications of these principles, let us consider in more detail what distinguishes human society from the rest of nature.

## Human Nature—and Society

We have seen how social ecology explains humanity’s continuity with the natural world, how we have developed out of “first nature” and created a “second nature.” But although there is clearly a continuity, our society is “hardly a ‘natural’ phenomenon, a phenomenon of first

<sup>62</sup> Bookchin, *Remaking Society* 36-37.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 77-78.

<sup>65</sup> Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 57, emphasis in original.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>68</sup> This stems directly from social ecology’s emphasis on mutualism and symbiosis as the decisive factor in natural evolution. Ibid., 25.

nature.” Bookchin argues that “although animals may be more or less *sociable*, their sociability is not evidence of the existence of a *society*. Society is unique to human beings.”<sup>69</sup>

Bookchin draws a sharp contrast between *society*, which is institutionally structured, and *community*, the simple and often undifferentiated relations between organisms. “Animals and even plants certainly form communities; ecosystems would be meaningless without conceiving animals, plants, and their abiotic substrate at the nexus of relationships that range from the intraspecific to the interspecific level,” he explains.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore it is clear that certain species, particularly primates, develop nexuses of interdependent relationships that may be so closely knit that it could be said they approximate a society or, at least, a rudimentary form of sociality. “But a society,” Bookchin implores, “however deeply it may be rooted in nature, is nevertheless *more* than a community. What makes human societies unique communities is the fact that they are *institutionalized* communities that are highly, often rigidly, structured around clearly manifest forms of responsibility, association and personal relationship in maintaining the material means of life.”<sup>71</sup> In other words, all societies are necessarily communities, but most communities are not societies. “One can find nascent social elements in animal communities,” Bookchin concludes, “but only human beings form societies—that is, institutionalized communities.”<sup>72</sup>

What is crucial here is that “societies, however well or poorly entrenched their institutions, can be *changed* by human action.”<sup>73</sup> In the absence of social institutions that can be modified or radically changed, “non-human animals may form and dissolve groups, but apart from genetically induced aggregations, like those of ‘social insects,’ they have minimal structure and permanence.”<sup>74</sup> Hence, Bookchin infers, “no culture is ‘natural’ in a strictly biological sense.”<sup>75</sup> This insight in no way opposes the notion of society to community, it merely

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<sup>69</sup> Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 123.

<sup>70</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 94n.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 123.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 123. It is worth noting here that the “seemingly hierarchical traits of many animals are more like variations in the links of a chain than organized stratification’s of the kind we find in human societies and institutions. If acts do not constitute institutions and episodes do not constitute history,” Bookchin explains, “individual behavioral traits do not form strata or classes.” Crucially, “Social strata are made of sterner stuff. They have a life of their own apart from the personalities who give them substance.” Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 95.

<sup>75</sup> Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 123.



cautions us to take note of the decisive distinctions between the two, and see how human society develops *beyond* the level of animal and plant communities.<sup>76</sup>

Indeed, the institutionalization of social relationships, and the highly symbolic language and rationality that provide justification as well as contestation of these institutions, have made us capable of consciously shaping the social world and to “conquer” every zone of this planet. Our adaptation to highly variegated environments is, in this sense, not merely a cognitive or technological advantage. Conscious social organization greatly affects our species’s capacity to carve out a place for us in nature, and to survive and prosper under climatically harsh and barren environments. By contrast, an animal normally “does not ‘make’ its world; it exists within a world in which it finds itself. Indeed, the survival of many species is highly vulnerable even to slight changes in habitat.”<sup>77</sup>

Today, it is all too common to assume that social traits inhere in the natural world. We often describe nature as hierarchical, or we may even call for “a council of all beings” in a “biospheric egalitarianism,” but such an approach to natural phenomena is anthropomorphic and renders these terms utterly meaningless. All the distinctly social institutions, such as hierarchies, parliaments, armies, and educational systems “presupposes a knowingness—an *intellectuality*—that has yet to emerge until the evolution of humanity and society.”<sup>78</sup> To be sure, “this knowingness or intellectuality does not suddenly explode in ecosystems with the appearance of humankind,” but this fact does not imply that we can retrospectively assign these traits to the natural world: “What is antecedent to what exists may contain the potentialities of what will emerge, but those antecedents do not acquire the actualization of these potentialities after they have emerged.”<sup>79</sup>

Here one may object that the unique constellation of human attributes and, eventually, our social institutions, was random in the larger image of evolutionary mechanisms of natural selection. Humanity may be considered a chance spark in a meaningless universe. To be sure, “To object that human beings might never have evolved but for chance appearances over the course of organic evolution ignores the compelling fact that humanity *does* exist, and that it

<sup>76</sup> “The failure to draw this distinction between animal or plant communities and human societies has produced considerable ideological mischief,” Bookchin alerts us, and has caused us to interpret predation within animal communities as war; individual linkages between animals as hierarchy and domination; and even animal foraging and metabolism as labor and economics. “All the latter,” he insists, “are strictly *social* phenomena.” Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 94n, emphasis in original.

<sup>77</sup> Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 236.

<sup>78</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 104n, emphasis in original.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

did not emerge *ab novo*.<sup>80</sup> In varying degrees, humanity's emergence followed from developmental potentialities and a clearly discernible logic with a surprising degree of evolutionary autogeny. We are products of a self-developmental tendency in natural evolution, not only chance events and conjunctions of them.<sup>81</sup>

It is in no way "necessary to invoke supernatural agents to account for humanity's appearance," but our "species could not have emerged unless there were potentialities in first nature to account for human evolution."<sup>82</sup>

Bookchin "tried to show that humanity and the human capacity to think are products of natural evolution, not 'aliens' in the natural world."<sup>83</sup> Indeed, every intuition tells us that human beings and their consciousness are results of an evolutionary tendency toward increasing differentiation, complexity, and subjectivity. This intuition has its basis in the paleontological evidence for this tendency. "The simplest unicellular fossils of the distant past and the most complex mammalian remains of recent times all testify to the reality of a remarkable biological drama," he explained. "This drama is the story of a nature rendered more and more aware of itself, a nature that slowly acquires new powers of subjectivity, and one that gives rise to a remarkable primate life-form, called human beings, that have the power to choose, alter, and reconstruct their environment," and ultimately "raise the moral issue of what *ought* to be, not merely live unquestioningly with what is."<sup>84</sup>

Yet, social ecology's interpretation of human emergence from within nature does not consist in a purely biological interpretation of our sociality, such as the theories popularized by Edward O. Wilson or Richard Dawkins. Indeed, the different understandings of the fundamental relationship between "the social" and "the natural" sharply distinguish social ecology from sociobiology.<sup>85</sup> We cannot accept sociobiology's crude reduction of our sociality into the arrangement of molecules in a double helix, Bookchin said.<sup>86</sup> "With the use of an evolutionary approach to explain the evolution of humanity out of animality, society out of nature, and mind out of body, we shed sociobiology's tyrannical 'morality of the gene.'"<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 234.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 41.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Bookchin, *Which Way for the Ecology Movement?*, 49-75; *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 35-58.

<sup>86</sup> Bookchin insists that we must recognize "the fact that we have developed as a species into a realm of second nature which he defines as "a moral, intellectual and social realm." Ibid., 38-39.

<sup>87</sup> Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 12.

Bookchin would argue that we “are eminently social animals not because of instinct but rather because we must cooperate with each other to mature in a healthy fashion.”<sup>88</sup>

Here, it is important to note that Bookchin’s critique of sociobiology would also befall Peter Kropotkin, the anarchist geographer that greatly inspired social ecology.<sup>89</sup> In the 1890s, Kropotkin presented a comprehensive series of replies to Thomas H. Huxley’s social Darwinist perspectives on “the struggle for existence” by pointing out the great role *mutual aid* plays in evolution, not only mutual strife.<sup>90</sup> Kropotkin located an instinct for sociality in human community; Bookchin would argue that it was precisely Kropotkin’s failure to distinguish a second nature—notably the differences between society and community—that would be problematic from a progressive social ecological perspective.<sup>91</sup> For Bookchin, it was not central whether the biological traits located in nature were emancipatory and cooperative, as in the case of Kropotkin, or deterministic and selfish, as in the case of Wilson and Dawkins. In a broader evolutionary perspective, Bookchin appreciated the pioneering work of Kropotkin in balancing Darwin’s theory of evolution, not only regarding mutual aid, but also symbiosis: “Recent data supports the applicability of Peter Kropotkin’s mutualistic naturalism not only to relationships between species but among complex cellular forms.”<sup>92</sup> Still, for Bookchin, it is “ecology alone”—not biology—“firmly rooted in *social* criticism and the vision of *social* reconstruction” that “can provide us with the means for remaking society in a way that will benefit nature *and* humanity.”<sup>93</sup>

“Human beings,” Bookchin stressed, “are not simply insects, rabbits, or deer; their potentiality for conscious agency makes them unique in the biosphere.”<sup>94</sup> And further: “ecology would be ill-served as a cause as well as a discipline (social as well as natural) if it

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 35. Here, Bookchin prefigures the fascinating analyses psychologist Michael Tomasello presents on the origins of human consociation. See Michael Tomasello, *The Origins of Human Communication* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008); and *Why we Cooperate* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).

<sup>89</sup> Kropotkin, Bookchin acknowledged, prefigured much of the paradigm of the ecology movement: “Ideas of decentralization, of a new ecological sensibility, of a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature, of humanly scaled communities, of libertarian relationships in society and between people—all restate Kropotkin’s basic views in *Mutual Aid*.” Murray Bookchin, “Introduction to Peter Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid*,” Unpublished Manuscript (New York: Tamiment Library, 1990), 48.

<sup>90</sup> Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution* (London: Freedom Press, 1996); Peter Kropotkin, *Ethics: Its Origins and Development* (New York: Dial Press, 1924). See also Lee Alan Dugatkin, *The Prince of Evolution: Peter Kropotkin’s Adventures in Science and Politics* (Louisville: CreateSpace, 2011).

<sup>91</sup> Bookchin, “Introduction to *Mutual Aid*,” 43–47.

<sup>92</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 60.

<sup>93</sup> Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 13, emphasis in original.

<sup>94</sup> Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 83.

became a mere justification for a pseudo-naturalism that takes little or no account of human agency and the social factors that profoundly determine the environment in which we live.”<sup>95</sup>

Human society differs markedly from natural communities; analogies are not directly applicable, they must be mediated. In the case of social ecology, Bookchin explains, “it is not in the *particulars* of differentiation that plant-animal communities are ecologically united with human communities; rather, it is the *logic of differentiation* that makes it possible to relate the mediations of nature and society into a continuum.”<sup>96</sup> We will return to this logic of differentiation and its ethical implications later. Suffice to say that our “human nature” consists above all in the potentialities conferred from broad natural and historical processes, not simply in the “facts” of our current constitution or capacities.

“To say that nature belongs in humanity just as humanity belongs in nature is to express a highly reciprocal and complementary relationship between the two instead of one structured around subordination and domination.”<sup>97</sup> In this analysis, neither society nor nature dissolves into the other. “Rather, social ecology tries to recover the distinctive attributes of both in a continuum that gives rise to a substantive ethics, wedding the social to the ecological without denying the integrity of each.”<sup>98</sup>

## A dialectical Holism

The comprehensive overview that social ecology offers is a dialectical holism. Bookchin emphasized that in order to understand nature on its own terms, we first need to shed static images of nature, redolent of monist and atomist ideologies alike—and tourist photos on mountain trips. A “frozen image of Nature is extremely deceptive. The *fixity* of a breathtaking vista simply does not exist,” he declared.<sup>99</sup> “Nature is not only dynamic at every moment of

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 60, emphases in original. “Wholeness, in fact, is completeness,” Bookchin explains. “The dynamic stability of the whole derives from a visible level of completeness in human societies as in climax ecosystems. What unites these modes of wholeness and completeness, however different they are in their specificity and their qualitative distinctness, is the logic of development itself. A climax forest is whole and complete as a result of the same unifying process—the same *dialectic*—that a particular social form is whole and complete.” Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 97, emphasis in original.

<sup>97</sup> “It is becoming a cliché to fault humanity’s ‘separation’ from nature as the source of ‘alienation’ in our highly fragmented world,” Bookchin complains: “We must see that *every* process is also a form of alienation, in the sense that differentiation involves separation from older forms of being as *well* as the absorption of what is negated into the new, such that the whole is the richly varied fulfillment of its latent potentialities.” Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 76, 92, emphases in original. Indeed, Bookchin shares “the Hegelian view that humanity had to be expelled from the Garden of Eden to attain the fullness of its humanness.” Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society*, 26.

<sup>98</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 92.

<sup>99</sup> Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 16, emphasis in original.

the day but, above all, is highly developmental,” he continued: “Lifeforms are continually being born, maturing, and dying, entering into elaborate food webs or networks that make possible the vistas we admire.”<sup>100</sup> Nonhuman nature “is basically an evolving and unfolding phenomenon, a richly fecund, even dramatic development that is forever changing.”<sup>101</sup> The most proper way of understanding nature, then, would be to consider it *as its evolution*.

Bookchin expressly defined “nonhuman nature precisely as an evolving process, as the totality, in fact, of its evolution.”<sup>102</sup> A concept of nature *as* evolution, then, encompasses *the overall trajectory* of natural development, and the *tendencies* we can trace herein, not only the specific evolution of any given organisms, species, and natural landscapes. Indeed, “if the thrust of evolution has any meaning, it is that a continuum is processual precisely in that it is graded as well as united, a flow of derived phases as well as a shared development from the simpler to the more complex.”<sup>103</sup> “Neither conflict nor differentiation should be permitted to override the other as the long-range character of development in nature and society.”<sup>104</sup> If we understand nature as evolution, and evolution as a “totality,” it is, in this sense, a *graded continuum*, and its most significant distinctions marking the transitions from the inorganic to the organic, and from the biological to the cultural. “Life itself, as distinguished from the nonliving,” he continues, “emerges from the inorganic latent with all the particularities it has imminently produced from the logic of its most nascent forms of self-organization. So do society as distinguished from biology, humanity as distinguished from animality, and individuality as distinguished from humanity.”<sup>105</sup> Indeed, we should be able to discern a “logic” in the development of phenomena, which can not only chart natural evolution, but explain it in a meaningful way. Social ecology suggests that it is in nature “a *general* directiveness that accounts for the fact that the inorganic did become organic, as a result of its *implicit capacity* for organicity; and for the fact that the organic did become more differentiated and metabolically self-maintaining and self-aware, as a result of potentialities that made for highly developed hormonal and nervous systems.”<sup>106</sup>

According to Bookchin, the “continuum that dialectical reason investigates” therefore “is a highly graded, richly entelechial, logically educative, and self-directive process of unfolding

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism*, 23.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 76.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 97, MC, 61.

<sup>106</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 28, emphasis in original.

toward ever-greater differentiation, wholeness, and adequacy, insofar as each potentiality is fully actualized given a specific range of development.”<sup>107</sup> There is no iron logic to this development; Bookchin does not deny that external factors, internal rearrangements, accidents, and even gross irrationalities may distort or preclude a potential development. “But,” he insists, “insofar as order does exist in reality and is not simply imposed upon it by mind, reality has a rational dimension.”<sup>108</sup> We have seen how Bookchin advanced a concept of “evolution as the dialectical development of ever-variegated, complex, and increasingly fecund *contexts* of plant-animal communities.”<sup>109</sup> Social ecology expressly builds upon naturalism—that is, contemporary studies of the natural world as it exists and unfolds—and infuses it with dialectical philosophy. This perspective, which thoroughly informs social ecology, also shapes its notions of nature and freedom, and our society’s engagement with the natural world.

Admittedly, there are many levels of wholeness we must consider. I would argue that our approach should encompass contextual as well as internal “wholes.” In every given phenomena we should be able to elicit the relative totality of the phenomenon in its contextual dynamics as well as its internal dynamics. The first sense refers to the internal totality: “Wholeness comprises the variegated structures, the articulations, and the mediations that impart to the whole a rich variety of forms and thereby add unique *qualitative* properties to what a strictly analytic mind often reduces to ‘innumerable’ and ‘random’ details.”<sup>110</sup> It is interesting to note that Diderot’s notion of *sensibilité* also inspires this holism: “An organism achieves its unity and sense of direction from the contextual wholeness of which it is part, a wholeness that imparts directiveness to the organism and reciprocally receives directiveness from it.”<sup>111</sup>

Now, nature is a vastly complex and variegated phenomenon, and will make no pretense to convey the full complexity of a dialectical holism here. Let me, however, use a few examples to explain how social ecology distinguishes itself from conventional atomist science as well as from other forms of ecological holism, notably versions of biocentric egalitarianism. Its

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Bookchin contrasted this view of nature to “the traditional notion of biological evolution based on the atomistic development of single life-forms, a characteristically entrepreneurial concept of the isolated ‘individual,’ be it animal, plant, or bourgeois—a creature which fends for itself and either ‘survives’ or ‘perishes’ in a marketplace ‘jungle.’” Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 56-57.

<sup>110</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 87-88, emphasis added.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 57.

emphasis on “wholeness” and “totality” markedly differs from more cosmic forms of “self-identification” and “oneness,” views that still have a strong standing in the ecology movement.

Against atomism, it can argue for the need to understand biological and ecological phenomena in terms of their wholeness. Consider, for example, how it is certainly true that a human being is an ensemble of chemicals, a physico-chemical phenomenon. While reductionism can explain our bodily constitution as a physico-chemical phenomenon, it cannot comprehend it as a remarkably complex form of life. Chemical analysis “provides us with no substitute for the multitude of forms, relationships, processes, and environments that the organic creates for itself as it metabolically sustains its own ‘selfhood’ in distinction from other ‘selves.’”<sup>112</sup> The only way to interpret organisms in this way is through *dissection*; a process that necessarily involves the cessation of life. Without the temporal and spatial dimensions, in which the self orients itself, life is simply inexplicable. Hans Jonas decried such an “ontology of death.”<sup>113</sup>

But dialectical holism can also hold its ground against the opposite argument, the lifting of *life* to a moral principle, regardless of whether such a principle takes the form of Paul W. Taylor’s individualist respect for all living organisms, or the more cosmic notion of “all life as one,” that Næss propounded. Taylor’s version of “biocentric egalitarianism” considers every *living individual* as having equal intrinsic worth and moral standing.<sup>114</sup> The origins of such a foundational moral obligation toward every single life is generally accredited to Albert Schweitzer, who considered that “the maintenance and enhancement of life are the only things that counts as being good in themselves.”<sup>115</sup> Within deep ecology’s version of “biocentric egalitarianism,” the relationship between life as an individual expression of a single organism, or of a particular species, or of an ecosystem, or indeed of natural processes, or of “nature as such,” has, as far as I can judge, never been resolved, and therefore any discussion of how the “intrinsic moral worth” should be balanced out remains a “deep question.” In the writings of Næss, Sessions, and Devall, a range of meanings are expressed, many of which are mutually exclusive. Suffice to say it here that the Næssian expansion of “self-identification” and “self-

<sup>112</sup> This view has its conceptual counterpart in analytic philosophy: “As the complex is trimmed down to its ‘irreducible’ components, the whole that forms the very premises of thought disappears into a meaningless, indeed formless heap of ‘matter,’ thereby erasing the very boundaries that give *definition* to a phenomenon as a component of a more complex ‘whole.’” Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 127, emphasis in original.

<sup>113</sup> Jonas, *Phenomenon of Life*, 15.

<sup>114</sup> Paul W. Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>115</sup> “All destruction of and injury to life, from whatever circumstances they may result,” he continues, are reckoned “as an evil.” His strict approach clearly forbids even mowing down one flower in vain, because “in so doing he injures life.” Albert Schweitzer, “Reverence for Life,” reprinted in Louis P. Pojman and Paul Pojman, eds., *Environmental Ethics*, 136-138.

realization,” which is at its core an individualist call for the identification with “a larger self,” not only jumps over society, culture, and politics, but its ever-more cosmic “identities,” lose all form and content, and has to fall back on “deep intuitions” and metaphors.<sup>116</sup>

*Holism* seems to have been introduced to the modern environmentalist movement through Aldo Leopold’s “land ethic,” where geographical ecosystems, which categorically include geological formations and natural cycles, are what are worth preserving.<sup>117</sup> This ecocentrism focused less on individual life forms than the ecological community as a whole, or ecosystems as such. Leopold urges us to view the land as a “collective organism,” a biotic community in which we are merely biotic citizens.”<sup>118</sup> But Leopold’s perspective is remarkably static and undifferentiated.

Bookchin saw his dialectical approach to ecology as more developmental—and truer to natural phenomena. Bookchin was convinced that to think “in terms of potentiality, process, mediation, and wholeness” was to “reach into the most underlying nature of things, just as to know the biography of a human being and the history of society is to know them in their authentic reality and depth.”<sup>119</sup> Indeed, “the universe bears witness to a *developing—not* merely moving—substance, whose most dynamic and creative attribute is its unceasing capacity for self-organization into increasingly complex forms.”<sup>120</sup>

Wholeness, however, is no teleological referent in Bookchin’s thought, and its evolving components are not merely parts of a terminal Hegelian “Absolute.” His concept of wholeness should be distinguished from a predetermined “Absolute,” just as demands for coherence in a body of views must be distinguished from the worship of such an “Absolute,” and just as the capacity of speculative reason to educe in a dialectically logical manner the *very real*

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<sup>116</sup> Næss arguably developed his notion of holism from Norwegian saying that “everything is interconnected” (“alt henger i hop”). This, of course, also resembles Barry Commoner’s famous, but simplistic, 1971 formulation of his “first law” of ecology: “everything is connected to everything else.”

<sup>117</sup> Leopold distilled his conclusions into the famous and disturbingly simplistic maxim that “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” In this regard, it is important to recognize that by the biotic community, Leopold does not just mean the community of human and non-human beings: No, “the land ethics simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.” See Aldo Leopold, “The Land Ethic,” in Pojman and Pojman (eds.), *Environmental Ethics*, 164, 171-172; See also Nash, *Rights of Nature*, 63-74.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 171. For a contemporary adaptation of Leopold’s outlook, see J. Baird Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (New York: SUNY, 1989), particularly 63-114.

<sup>119</sup> Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 61.

<sup>120</sup> “The point is that we can no longer be satisfied with the theory of an inert “matter” that fortuitously aggregates into life,” Bookchin emphasized. “Form plays a central role in this developmental and growth process, while function is an indispensable correlate. The orderly universe that makes science possible and its highly concise logic—mathematics—meaningful presupposes the correlation of form with function.” Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 59-60, emphasis in original.



*potentialities* of humanity for freedom is neither teleological or absolutist, much less “totalitarian.”<sup>121</sup> Indeed, Bookchin would not use the concept of totality lightly. “Terms like wholeness, totality, and even community,” he noted, “have perilous nuances for a generation that has known fascism and other totalitarian ideologies.”<sup>122</sup>

Wholeness, then, signifies “the *relative* completion of a phenomenon’s potentiality,” as well as “the fulfillment of latent possibility as such,” all its concrete manifestations aside, in order to “become more than the realm of *mere* possibility and attain the ‘truth’ or fulfilled reality of possibility.”<sup>123</sup> This potentiality, he claimed, “can be a newly planted seed, a newly born infant, a newly formed community, a newly emerging society.” Despite their radically different *specificity*, they are all *united by a processual reality*, a shared metabolism of development, a unified catalysis of growth as distinguished from mere ‘change’ that provides us with the most insightful way of *understanding* them we can possibly achieve.”<sup>124</sup>

For Bookchin, wholeness is “the unity that finally gives order to the particularity of each of these phenomena; it is what has emerged from within the process, what integrates the particularities into a unified form, what renders the unity an operable reality and a ‘being’ in the literal sense of the term.” That is to say that order literally is “the actualized *unity* of its diversity from the flowing and emergent process that yields its self-realization, the fixing of its directiveness into a clearly contoured form,” as well as the emergent “creation in a dim sense of a ‘self’ that is identifiable with respect to the ‘others’ with which it interacts.”<sup>125</sup>

## The Meaning of Unity in Diversity

For Bookchin, the Hegelian notion of “unity in diversity” carries a special meaning for ecological philosophy. “What makes unity in diversity in nature more than a suggestive ecological metaphor for unity in diversity in society is precisely the underlying fact of wholeness.”<sup>126</sup> By this, Bookchin meant “varying degrees of the actualization of potentialities,

<sup>121</sup> Neither the rational unfolding of human potentialities nor their actualization in an eternally given “Totality” is predestined, he insisted. Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 167.

<sup>122</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 88; See also Janet Biehl and Peter Staudenmaier, *Ecofascism Revisited* (Porsgrunn: New Compass, 2011).

<sup>123</sup> Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 60-61, emphasis in original.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., emphases in original.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., emphasis in original.

<sup>126</sup> Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 60.

the organic unfolding of the wealth of particularities that are latent in the as-yet-undeveloped potentiality.”<sup>127</sup> But how is this translated into more practical terms?

In his early writings, Bookchin would describe an ecological society as one that reflects the unity in diversity of nature. A society that allowed for the richest variety would be one that followed ecological principles. Bookchin summed up the *critical* message of ecology this way: “If we diminish variety in the natural world, we debase its unity and wholeness; we destroy the forces making for natural harmony and a lasting equilibrium; and, what is even more significant, we introduce an absolute retrogression in the development of the natural world which may eventually render the environment unfit for advanced forms of life.”<sup>128</sup> Bookchin summed up the *reconstructive* message of ecology as follows: “if we wish to advance the unity and stability of the natural world, if we wish to harmonize it, we must conserve and promote variety.”<sup>129</sup> In the early writings, Bookchin would emphasize how studies of food webs and ecosystems demonstrated “that the complexity of biotic relationships, their diversity and intricacy, is a crucial factor in assessing an ecosystem’s stability.”<sup>130</sup> Today, this ecological insight has become conventional wisdom.

“Ecology,” he would claim, “advances a broader conception of nature and of humanity’s relationship with the natural world,” which “sees the balance and integrity of the biosphere as an end in itself.”<sup>131</sup> That is to say that natural diversity “is to be cultivated not only because the more diversified the components that make up an ecosystem, the more stable the ecosystem, but diversity is desirable for its own sake, a value to be cherished as part of a spiritized notion of the living universe.”<sup>132</sup>

But Bookchin would take this notion further: “Differentiation not only emphasizes the importance of variety for ecological stability, but is also the all-important context for the eventual emergence of a nascent freedom in an ecocommunity.”<sup>133</sup> Complexity, which is a

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, 35.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Bookchin, *The Modern Crisis*, 58.

<sup>131</sup> Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society*, 59.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. “Although this ethics [of social ecology] expressed at times as an appeal for the ‘respiritization of the natural world,’ recurs throughout the literature of social ecology, it should not be mistaken for a theology that raises a deity above the natural world or even that seeks to discover one within it. The spirituality advanced by social ecology is definitively *naturalist* (as one would expect, given its relation to ecology itself, which stems from the biological sciences) rather than supernaturalistic or pantheistic areas of speculation.” Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism*, 21-22, emphasis in original. Indeed: “To worship or revere *any* being, natural or supernatural, will always be a form of self-subjugation and servitude that ultimately yields social domination, be it in the name of nature, society, gender or religion.” Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 13.

<sup>133</sup> Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 25-26.

product of variety, opens alternative evolutionary pathways. “The more differentiated the life-form and the environment in which it exists, the more acute is its overall sensorium, the greater its flexibility, and the more active its participation in its own evolution.” Indeed, “the two concepts cannot be raised without leading to interaction with each other. The greater the differentiation, the wider is the degree of participation in elaborating the world of life,” he concluded: “An ecological ethics not only affirms life, it also focuses the *creativity* of life.”<sup>134</sup>

“Unity in diversity,” Bookchin explains, “is not only the determinant of an ecosystem’s stability; it is the source of an ecosystem’s fecundity, of its innovativeness, of its evolutionary potential to create newer, still more complex life-forms and biotic interrelationships.”<sup>135</sup> The fact “that biotic—and social—evolution has been marked until recently by the development of ever more complex species and ecocommunities raises an even more challenging issue,” he adds: “The diversity of an ecocommunity may be a source of greater stability from an agricultural standpoint: but from an evolutionary standpoint, it may be an ever-expanding, albeit nascent source of freedom within nature, a medium for providing varying degrees of *choice, self-directiveness, and participation by life-forms in their own development.*”<sup>136</sup>

Nature thus produces the preconditions for freedom. “What makes unity in diversity in nature more than a suggested ecological metaphor for unity in diversity in society is the underlying philosophical concept of wholeness,” and by that Bookchin means “varying levels of actualization, and unfolding of the wealth of particularities, that are latent in an as-yet-undeveloped potentiality.”<sup>137</sup>

Bookchin suggested we take Hegel’s maxim that “the true is the whole,” and turn it on its head to declare that the “whole is the true.”<sup>138</sup> That is to say that the potentiality of a given phenomenon would more truly be itself than its limited and unfinished form. This reversal of terms could come to mean that “the true lies in the self-consummation of a *process* through its development, in the flowering of its latent particularities into their fullness or wholeness, just as the potentialities of a child achieve expression in the wealth of experiences and the physical growth that enter into adulthood.”<sup>139</sup> This way, “the ecological principle of unity in diversity

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Bookchin, *The Modern Crisis*, 58.

<sup>136</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 77, emphasis in original.

<sup>137</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 96.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 97.

grades into a richly mediated social principle,” and this, he argued, fueled his term *social ecology*.<sup>140</sup>

“Speaking in ecological terms, the making of the ‘whole’ we call a rounded, creative and richly variegated human being crucially depends upon community supports for which no amount of self-interest and egotism is a substitute.”<sup>141</sup> Indeed, “the making of a human being,” from this perspective, “is a collective process, a process in which both the community and the individual *participate*. It is also a process which, at best, evokes by its own variety of stimuli the wealth of abilities and traits within the individual that achieve their full degree of *differentiation*.”<sup>142</sup> We see here how Bookchin moves toward a vision of an ecological *society*: “The extent to which these individual potentialities are realized, the unity of diversity they achieve, and the scope they acquire” he emphasized, “depend crucially upon the degree to which the community itself is participatory and richly differentiated in the stimuli, forms, and choices it creates that make for personal self-formation.”<sup>143</sup> If, on the other hand, the individual is “divested of differentiated stimuli, opportunities, choices, and variegated groups that speaks to his or her proclivities,” he or she becomes “a homogenized thing, passive, obedient, and privatized, which makes for a submissive personality and a manipulable constituent.”<sup>144</sup>

Later, however, he increasingly came to see the unity in diversity as a concept to explain the development of a totality *inhering* in phenomena, notably in living organisms. The philosophy of social ecology sought to capture the dialectical tension at any given stage of development, building on Hegelian notions of dialectics. As we have seen, living creatures must be understood as their biography; a snapshot or dissection will not explain what a living being is. Every being is, according to social ecology, always in tension between the biography of the being and its potentiality.<sup>145</sup> That is to say, every living organism exists in a dynamic tension between its *cumulative* development and its *potential* development; the present consists of the tension between the past and the future, between its essential nature and its existential nature; and, social ecology would add, in nexuses of relationships, communities,

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<sup>140</sup> Bookchin, *The Modern Crisis*, 59.

<sup>141</sup> “The love, care, aid, and goodwill that a group can furnish to an individual are perhaps the most important contribution it can make to an individual’s ego development.” Ibid, 35.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid. 35-36, emphasis in original.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> At any given point of our development, human beings are quite simply not just what we are. That is to say, at that moment, we are rather the culmination of our entire development, we embody the history of that development, but we are also everything that we have the potentiality to become, indeed, what we are naturally and culturally structured to become.

and ecosystems. The same analyses is applied to ecocommunities, societies, and nature as a whole. Such a dialectical holistic perspective is arguably truer to the organism as well as to the ecocommunities in which it participates.

Bookchin did not consider himself a Hegelian and dismissed the idealist interpretation of the natural world. Hegel's idealist account gave a highly ordered infinite world of concepts, in contrast to the disorder and the infiniteness of nature.<sup>146</sup> The Hegelian view of an ordered universe approximates a cosmic principle of rationality, a regulation and rational control of the universe. From Hegel, then, we understand reason *as* the universal ordering principle, and this involves by necessity not only subjectivity but also objectivity and externality.<sup>147</sup> It is a principle of order that comes with form, measure, lawfulness: that is to say, with rational necessity. "The cosmic *Geist* advanced by Hegel would be *form as such*, but form conceived in its embodiment as dialectical in character, hence a form that becomes ever-differentiated, organized, and subjectivized."<sup>148</sup> Here, Hegel approximates the philosophy of social ecology.<sup>149</sup> In Bookchin's dialectical naturalism, subjectivity would be recognized as being inherent in organized substance; and, to follow Hegel's tripartite division in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the intense drama of cosmic evolution would then be recognized as the ever-increasing differentiation of form and substance toward *consciousness*, *self-consciousness*, and *reason*.

From this perspective, every phenomenon, and certainly all organisms, exist in a ceaseless tension between what it *is* at any given time and what it is *structured to become*. There is an *inherent unrest* in our being, as we struggle to become other than what we are, or, it could be

<sup>146</sup> For Hegel, his logic is "the only real candidate for the role of strict logical proof," the arena in which conceptual argument reveal the structure of actuality as the embodiment of rational necessity. By studying Hegel's logical works, "we are dealing not simply with abstract logical categories; we are also grasping the ground plan or essential structure to which the world conforms to its unfolding." Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 225-226; Bookchin, *The Politics of Cosmology*, 895-896.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 888-889, 895-896.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 902.

<sup>149</sup> Still, Bookchin's ecological dialectics is markedly different from Hegel's idealist interpretation of the natural world. "All of Hegel's categories in the *Philosophy of Nature* is precisely that: *categories*," Bookchin pointed out. "Rich as the work may be with its wealth of examples—a feature that is no less true of the logic that professes to be dwelling in the realm of pure thought—the categories of Hegel's *Naturphilosophie* are also educed and ordered notionally in terms of a logical dialectic." To be sure, "Hegel is always aware that he is dealing with nature—an impure nature from a logical viewpoint—which irascibly interfered with the flow of pure thought. He is dealing with the Idea externalized that constitutes the Other of the Idea in its subjective inwardness." Still, it must be noted that this externalization of the Idea as Nature is not evolutionary; Hegel establishes a logical chain of Being that is not processual in any Darwinian sense: his dialectics is not ecological. "It is strictly eductive and is no more temporal from an evolutionary viewpoint than is the logic. Hence the *Philosophy of Nature* invites us to explore a *logical* interpretation of nature, not a physical one." Ibid., 913, emphasis in original; See also G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Nature: Part Two of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

said, *more* of what we are. Our being is ceaselessly becoming. To put it differently, our essential nature is perpetually struggling to actualize itself in a richer form of existential nature, which would be the rational unification of form and content in its ecological nexus. In this sense, we are all “human becomings,” not simply “human beings.” Indeed, every being is becoming. It is the crucial task of dialectical holism to unearth this inherent unrest residing within all living creatures and to see them as the totality of their becoming. *At the same time*, we must be able to also recognize the social and ecological contexts, that is to say, the “greater wholes” in which these organisms take part.

Bookchin would argue that it was his ecological *holism* that gave his ideas a radical thrust; it was not merely its individual components, but the *unity* of his views.<sup>150</sup> This, however, is an unfortunate formulation, as it speaks more of the *coherence* of his views than of an ecological holism, which cannot be reduced to internal coherence. I mention this only because it is a common trope in the ecology movement to hail principles of “diversity,” “unity” or that “everything is connected” as excuses for an eclecticism, false consensus, or ensembles of utterly contradictory ideas.<sup>151</sup> But ecological holism is one thing, and ideological coherence is another. Social ecology claims that both are needed, but they should not be confused. There is another sense in which Bookchin’s ecological holism gives these ideas a radical thrust: it inheres in the very notion of a *dialectical* holism, and the mediated processes of uncovering the tensions implicit in organisms, processes, and evolution itself: in other words, withing the processes of formulating a social ecological ethics and practice. As we have seen, Bookchin “ecologizes” Hegel’s concept of actuality and its logical eduction. And, as we shall later see, it becomes the critical “should-be” that contrasts with and *evaluates* the existing “what-is.”<sup>152</sup> It is *this* notion of eduction and potentiality that animates the ethics and politics of social ecology.

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<sup>150</sup> Bookchin also said: “‘Coherence’ is my favorite word.” The mere uttering of such a statement does not render an ideology coherent, but Bookchin certainly strove to approach its ideal. Unfortunately, despite a broad and dynamic body of ideas, Bookchin’s philosophy of nature was never *systematized* into a comprehensive ecological outlook, and his presentations were “more suggestive than exhaustive.” Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 67, 79; *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, x.

<sup>151</sup> Arne Næss is a striking case in point: His ecumenical position allowed almost every thinkable view within deep ecology as long as stemmed from asking “deep” or “even deeper” questions. It is also worth noting that Næss called his very own philosophical twist of deep ecology *Ecosophy T* “to avoid unfruitful polemics,” which, taken together with his “principles of avoiding undue bias” as well as his “pluralist and possibilist” approach to philosophy immune to criticisms, regardless of how banal or self-contradictory this philosophy is. Arne Næss, “Ecosophy T: Deep versus Shallow Ecology,” in Louis P. Pojman and Paul Pojman, *Environmental Ethics*, fifth edition (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2008), 220; Arne Næss, *Life’s Philosophy: Reason and Feeling in a Deeper World*, with Per Ignvar Haukeland (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), notably 56–7.

<sup>152</sup> Bookchin, *The Politics of Cosmology*, 902.

Taken together, I believe that these distinctions between first and second nature, the notion of participatory evolution, and a dialectical holism, explain the basic impetus of Bookchin's philosophy of nature. He would argue that at this point in history, the basic questions of ecological philosophy cannot be limited to abstract metaphysical speculation or poetical metaphors: the crucial point for Bookchin being that our definitions of nature and what ethical standards we develop out of these definitions "may ultimately decide whether human society will creatively foster natural evolution, or whether we will render the planet uninhabitable for all complex life-forms, including ourselves."<sup>153</sup>

In this chapter, I have also looked at how our cultural realm is an extension of nature's own evolution, and our human capacities and potentialities are eminently natural. But we have not only developed out of "first nature." Today, human society simplifies the biosphere and may ultimately destroy the natural foundations for life. Why is contemporary society in an antagonistic relationship to nature? What went wrong?

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<sup>153</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 1.





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*In addressing the sources of our present ecological and social problems, perhaps the most fundamental message that social ecology advances is that the very idea of dominating nature stems from the domination of human by human.<sup>1</sup>*

## Society Against Nature

Humanity constitutes a unique development of the natural world. “Humanity’s awareness of itself, its ability to generalize this awareness to the level of a highly systematic understanding of its environment in the form of philosophy, science, ethics, and aesthetics” makes it special in the biosphere: humanity’s “capacity to alter itself and its environment systematically by means of knowledge and technology places it beyond the realm of the subjectivity that exists in first nature,” Bookchin writes.<sup>2</sup> More significantly, here, is the fact that human beings live in societies, which are *institutionalized* communities. Our institutional arrangements can range from despotisms to democracies, and all of these institutional forms are ideologically crafted

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<sup>1</sup> Bookchin, *Free Cities*, 13, emphasis in original.

<sup>2</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 30. This in no ways diminishes other distinct human attributes, but links these attributes historically to our conscious, indeed, ideological, *crafting* of institutions and highlight their impacts on our cultural achievements. Human beings, Bookchin explains, “can literally *create* choices which do not exist in their natural habitats. They can imagine a great variety of alternatives from which to choose, constructing them in forms that do not exist in first nature. With extraordinary flexibility, they can remake their immediate environments to suit clearly understood or anticipated needs. And very significantly, they can articulate through speech, writing, cooperation, and by other expressive representations, such as pictures, specific aims that go far beyond mere survival, comfort, and self-defense. Reasoning by analogy or by inference and deduction, they can create increasingly complex and effective institutions, customs, and methods of systematic learning, normally developing appropriate ways to guarantee the satisfaction of their emotional as well as their material needs.” Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 236-237, emphasis in original.

and *mutable*: their contents and significance are justified, interpreted, challenged, and are even fought over in bitter civil wars.

This insight has some important consequences. First, it makes it impossible for us to identify the *existing* society with society *as such*. Our societies can be changed for better or for worse, and this *historical* fact is an essential part of our human species-being. In a period of ecological breakdown, we need to discuss ways in which reorganizing our social institutions and cultural patterns could effect a reharmonization of humanity with the natural world. In this respect, our dialectical approach reveals that “society *is* the history of social development with its many different social forms and possibilities.”<sup>3</sup> Social ecology is obliged to show how society, too, undergoes differentiation and elaboration.<sup>4</sup>

Second, this means that we should study our historical past, looking to epochs and cultures that nurtured more benign relationships to the natural world. Furthermore, as social ecology clearly expresses, society is not a sudden “eruption” in the world, and social life has always had a naturalistic dimension.<sup>5</sup> Even today, natural ecosystems and human communities interact with each other in very existential ways. “Every social evolution, in fact, is virtually an extension of natural evolution into a distinctly human realm,” and we should study the ecological dimensions of community life. To understand how societies develop and have developed, then, we must also examine the *processes of socialization*.<sup>6</sup> “Culturally,” Bookchin adds, “we are all the repositories of social history, just as our bodies are the repositories of natural history.”<sup>7</sup> Our being as a species is closely related to our being as *social* creatures and by studying humanity’s emergence out of animality, social ecology seeks to understand how we have developed an antagonistic relationship to the rest of nature.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 43, emphasis in original.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>6</sup> “The emergence of society,” Bookchin insists, “is a *natural* fact that has its origins in the biology of human socialization.” Here, “the biological dimension that Robert Briffault adds to what we call society and socialization cannot be stressed too strongly. It is a decisive presence, not only in the origins of society over the ages of animal evolution, but in the daily recreation of society in our everyday lives.” Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 25, 26, 27, emphases in original; *Social Ecology and Communalism*, 30.

<sup>7</sup> “From our embryonic development to our layered brain, we partly recapitulate our own natural evolution. We are not so remote from our primate ancestry that we can ignore its physical legacy in our stereoscopic vision, acuity of intelligence, and grasping fingers. We phase into society as individuals in the same way that society, phasing out of nature, comes into itself.” Even “human intellectuality, although distinct, also has a far-reaching natural basis. Our brains and nervous systems did not suddenly spring into existence without a long antecedent natural history.” Our capacity to think on complex conceptual levels “can be traced back to nerve networks of primitive invertebrates, the ganglia of a mollusk, the spinal cord of a fish, the brain of an amphibian, and the cerebral cortex of a primate.” Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 43, 31; Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 98.

<sup>8</sup> Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 15.

Indeed, what makes social ecology stand out among ecological philosophies “is the view that the basic problems which pit society against nature emerge from *within* social development itself—not *between* society and nature.”<sup>9</sup> According to social ecology, “the divisions between society and nature have their deepest roots in divisions within the social realm, namely, deep-seated conflicts between human and human.”<sup>10</sup> Social ecology’s leitmotif, then, is to explore the prospects for how we can reintegrate humanity with the natural world by changing society.

In light of Bookchin’s convergence of nature philosophy and social philosophy, we can understand what Bookchin means when he states that “the notion that man is destined to dominate nature is by no means a universal feature of human culture.”<sup>11</sup> Bookchin consistently emphasized how human attempts to dominate nature “emerged very gradually from a broader social development: the increasing domination of human by human.”<sup>12</sup>

## Organic Societies

In the 1970s and early 1980s, Bookchin explored the outlooks, technics, and forms of thinking shared by preliterate, nonhierarchical societies and how these views and practices contrasted with civilizations based on hierarchy and domination.<sup>13</sup> In our early past, he pointed out, we find “communities that might well be called *organic societies* because of their intense solidarity internally and with the natural world.”<sup>14</sup> People in preliterate cultures regarded themselves “as part of the natural world. They were neither above nor below it but *within* it.”<sup>15</sup> This, for Bookchin, did not merely suggest an undifferentiated unity with nature, but stemmed from the strong communal bonds in organic societies. “From this feeling of unity between the individual and the community emerges a feeling of unity between the community and its environment.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 32.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 109.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> In his early writings, notably the *Ecology of Freedom*, Bookchin was critical of the claims of “civilization,” always placing it in quotation marks. Later, however, we would forcefully argue that there is a directionality to human history that involves civilizational advances and genuine progress. See Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 10-64; *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, vii-xx, 147-183; *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 8-34, 228-261.

<sup>14</sup> By the term “organic society,” Bookchin emphatically did not mean “a society conceived as an organism,” a concept he regarded as “redolent with corporatist and totalitarian notions of social life.” The term denoted “a spontaneously formed, non-coercive, and egalitarian society.” Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 69n, 110.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 112.

Nature begins *as* life, Bookchin points out, and from the very outset of human consciousness, it enters directly into consociation with humanity. What is most natural to early human communities, then, is an abundantly fecund, all-encompassing “livingness” that is integral to its knowingness, a world of life that “occupies the whole foreground exposed to man’s immediate view.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, “the organic community is conceived to be part of the balance of nature,” Bookchin points out: as a forest community or a soil community, it “is a truly ecological community or *ecocommunity* peculiar to its ecosystem, with an active sense of participation in the overall environment and the cycles of nature.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, “if we are to explore human nature,” Bookchin adds, “we cannot ignore certain features about it that justify a belief in its cooperative and life-affirming tendencies.”<sup>19</sup>

The overwhelming mass of anthropological evidence, Bookchin claims, shows that “participation, mutual aid, solidarity, and empathy were the social virtues that early human groups emphasized within their communities.”<sup>20</sup> Early human associations must have fostered a strong predisposition for interdependence among members of a group, and the first institutions humans created were *biosocial*, crafted out of the extended nurturing and cultivation of offspring.<sup>21</sup> “The protracted period of development which makes for the mental ability of humans to form a culture also fosters a deep sense of interdependence that promotes the formation and stability of the community.”<sup>22</sup>

This “human interdependence must have assumed a highly structured form.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, contrasted with primate communities, even the earliest human associations “are basically stable, highly institutionalized, and they are marked by a degree of solidarity, indeed, by a degree of creativity, that has no equal in nonhuman species as far as we know.”<sup>24</sup> In early bands, tribes, and clans, human sociality was structured primarily around blood lines. “The

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<sup>17</sup> “That the world is alive is really the most natural view, and largely supported by prima-facie evidence.” Jonas, *Phenomenon of Life*, 7; Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 113.

<sup>18</sup> For these communities, it is worth noting, “nature is not merely a habitat; it is a *participant* that advises the community.” Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 112-113.

<sup>19</sup> Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 34.

<sup>20</sup> Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 28.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 34.

<sup>23</sup> Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 28.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. “We see no such contrived institutional infrastructures in nonhuman communities, although the rudiments of a social bond do exist in the mother-offspring relationship and in common forms of mutual aid.” Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 88.

blood-tie and the rights and duties that surround it are embodied in an unspoken oath that comprise the only visible unifying principle of early community life.”<sup>25</sup>

Anthropology also shows that organic societies shared other noteworthy commonalities. First, these communities were remarkably egalitarian. “Chiefs,” for example, “where they authentically exist and are not the mere creations of the colonizer’s mind, have no true authority in a coercive sense.”<sup>26</sup> In early societies, the power we find is episodic, not institutional, and periodic, not traditional; in this sense it resembles “the ‘dominance’ traits we encounter among primates.”<sup>27</sup> To a great extent, these communities avoided coercion in dealing with internal affairs, and, as anthropologist Paul Radin would emphasize, organic societies displayed a “complete parity or equality between individuals, age-groups and sexes.”<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, these communities practiced *usufruct*, which meant that every member of community was free to appropriate resources merely by virtue of the fact that they were using them.<sup>29</sup> Finally, Radin highlighted what he called the “irreducible minimum,” which was the inalienable right of every individual in the community “to food, shelter and clothing” irrespective of how much the individual has contributed to the community.<sup>30</sup>

Early human communities were intensely cohesive. Eventually treaties of mutual obligation and reciprocity would “extend beyond the blood oath into social oaths” and were the early elaboration of human communities into genuine societies, “the first glimmering’s of a universal *humanitas* that lies beyond the horizon of a universal *animalitas*.”<sup>31</sup> Over time, all the biosocial institutions of early human communities would be transformed into hierarchical relationships, which greatly affected society’s relationship to the natural world.

Bookchin demanded we look into our human past to explore and value alternative lifeways. In contrast to many in the deep ecology movement, however, he would be very critical of attempts to resuscitate Neolithic cosmologies, spiritualisms, and practices; we should learn from these experiences, and we should broaden our perspectives on human evolution, but we

<sup>25</sup> “This bond,” Bookchin claims, “initially derives from woman. She alone becomes the very protoplasm of sociality.” Furthermore, “community, through the blood oath, this affirms itself with each birth and death. To violate it is to violate the solidarity of the group itself, to challenge its sense of communal mystery.” Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 120, 127.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Radin quoted in *ibid.*, 123.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 116, 123.

<sup>30</sup> “To deny anyone the irreducible minimum was equivalent to saying that the man no longer existed, that he was dead” said Radin; in short, Bookchin adds, “to cut across the grain of the world conceived as a universe of life.” Paul Radin quoted in *ibid.*, 123.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 121.

should not attempt to *imitate* any prelapsarian society or cosmology. “The case for hunting-gathering as humanity’s ‘golden age,’” he would argue, “is totally lacking in evolutionary promise,” and to seek a return to a “primitive” human past is no way to achieve a free nature.<sup>32</sup>

“Yet,” he admits, “the thought lingers that, at the dawn of history,” a Neolithic village society had emerged “in which life seemed to be unified by a communal disposition of work and its product; by a procreative relationship with the natural world, one that found overt expression in fertility rites; by a pacification of the relationships between humans and the world around them.”<sup>33</sup> What is significant here is not the *specifics* of their thoughts and practices, but what we can learn from the fact that “their thinking occurs in a cultural context that is fundamentally different from ours.”<sup>34</sup> In short, studies of organic society shows that for most of our history, human beings did not crave domination over nature.<sup>35</sup>

## Hierarchy and Complementarity

The notion of domination is inexorably linked to the emergence of hierarchy, Bookchin would insist. But what *is* hierarchy? Bookchin was reluctant to confine hierarchy to a strict, formal definition, but minimally it describes “cultural, traditional and psychological systems of obedience and command.”<sup>36</sup> Bookchin viewed hierarchies “historically and existentially as a complex system of command and obedience in which elites enjoy varying degrees of control over their subordinates without necessarily exploiting them.”<sup>37</sup> As such it was a social terms and did not describe relationships in the natural world. “A hierarchy is based on domination by institutionalized strata,” Bookchin insists, “such as gerontocracies, patriarchies, warrior sodalities, shamanistic guilds, priestly corporations, and the like over subjugated strata who

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 125n.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>34</sup> Indeed, “from a formal viewpoint, there is a very real sense in which preliterate people were or are obliged to think in much the same ‘linear’ sense as we are in dealing with the more mundane aspects of life. Whatever their shortcomings as a substitute for wisdom and a world outlook, conventional logical operations are needed for survival.” Ibid., 109, 110 and 15-64.

<sup>35</sup> “Neolithic artifacts seem to reflect the communion of humanity and nature that patently expressed the communion of humans with each other: a solidarity of the community with the world of life that articulated an intense solidarity within the community itself. As long as this internal solidarity persisted, nature was its beneficiary.” Ibid., 129.

<sup>36</sup> Although hierarchies have institutional foundations, Bookchin insisted that they were not limited to “the economic and political systems to which the terms class and State most appropriately refer.” Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 68.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. The latter part of the sentence, refers to Bookchin’s belief that hierarchy and domination as more fundamental and more versatile than class struggle and economic exploitation. There was more to “the history of all hitherto existing societies” than the existence of class struggle, contrary to Marx and Engels’s assertion in *The Communist Manifesto*.

are visibly underprivileged on an ongoing basis.”<sup>38</sup> What we normally call domination in nature, Bookchin advised, “is a human projection of highly organized systems of *social* command and obedience onto highly idiosyncratic, individual, and asymmetrical forms of often mildly coercive behavior in animal communities.”<sup>39</sup> Hierarchical relationships are neither ruthlessly fixed by instinct on the one hand nor idiosyncratic on the other: they “must comprise a clearly *social* structure of coercive and privileged ranks that exist apart from the idiosyncratic individuals who seem to be dominant within a given community, a hierarchy that is guided by a social logic that goes beyond individual interactions or inborn patterns of behavior.”<sup>40</sup>

To be sure, Bookchin admitted that coercion exists in nature; so does pain and suffering. However, *cruelty* does not: “Animal intention and will are too limited to produce an ethics of good and evil or kindness or cruelty.”<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, “it is meaningless to speak of hierarchy in an ecosystem and in the succession of ecosystems” which, “in contrast to monadic species-oriented development, form the true story of natural evolution.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, “What renders ecology so important in comparing ecosystems to societies,” Bookchin argued, “is that it decisively challenges the very function of hierarchy as a way of ordering reality, of dealing with differentiation and variation,” indeed, with “otherness” as such.<sup>43</sup> There is a very real sense in which domination and hierarchy are social terms that had to be developed within the social world before they could be extended into the natural world.<sup>44</sup>

To be sure, “organic societies, even the most egalitarian, are not homogenous social groups. Each member of the community is defined by certain everyday roles based on sex, age, and ancestral lineage.” But “in early organic societies, these roles do not seem to have been structured along hierarchical lines, nor do they seem to have involved the domination of

<sup>38</sup> Admittedly, there are more or less “dominant” individuals in various communities, but “a hierarchy goes with an institution such as a monarchy, bureaucracy, or even a stable patriarchal family—relationships that are not institutionalized in the animal world.” Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 49, 50.

<sup>39</sup> Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 33. “I cannot emphasize too strongly that hierarchy in society is an *institutional* phenomenon, not a biological one.” Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 66.

<sup>40</sup> “Even if the term dominance were stretched to include ‘queen’ bees and ‘alpha’ baboons, *specific* acts of coercion by *individual* animals can hardly be called domination. Acts do not constitute institutions; episodes do not make a history. And highly structured insect behavioral patterns, rooted in instinctual drives, are too inflexible to be regarded as a social.” Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 93-94, emphases in original.

<sup>41</sup> Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 35.

<sup>42</sup> Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 64-65.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67.

<sup>44</sup> The same is true, of course, for substantial *freedom* and *ethics*. In the earliest organic societies, “notions such as ‘equality’ and ‘freedom’ do not exist. Moreover, because they are not placed in juxtaposition to the concepts of ‘inequality’ and ‘unfreedom,’ these notions lack definability.” Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 110.

human by human.”<sup>45</sup> Indeed, *difference* “does not by itself yield hierarchy or even a certain measure of dominance.”<sup>46</sup> In organic societies, Bookchin claims, there were very real differences between individuals, age groups, and sexes, but these differences were not organized hierarchically, neither in social practices or in the minds of its members. The same was true for the relationships between humanity and the natural manifold of living and nonliving phenomena.<sup>47</sup> These relationships were *complementary*, and complementarity here denotes a form of mutualism in which communities are created and strengthened as unities of differences.<sup>48</sup>

## The Historical Emergence of Hierarchy

Bookchin urges us “to look within the primordial community to find the early embryonic structures that transformed organic society into class society.”<sup>49</sup> The cumulative development of nature into society was richly mediated “by the prolonged dependence of the human young on parental care, by the blood tie as the earliest social and cultural bond beyond immediate parental care, by the so-called ‘sexual division of labor,’ and by age-based status groups and their role in the origin of hierarchy.”<sup>50</sup> Gradually, Bookchin explains, organic societies began to develop less traditional forms of differentiation and stratification and their primal unity began to break down.<sup>51</sup> These structures, he urges, must be regarded as more fundamental than classes. Indeed, it is “hierarchies rooted in age, sex, and quasi-religious and quasi-political needs that create the power and the material relationships from which classes were formed.”<sup>52</sup>

In his early writings, Bookchin highlighted how the oppression of women preceded classes and state formations, and emphasized the male usurpation of power in a community, but he eventually came to see the elders of a community to be “the architects *par excellence* of social life, of social power, and of its institutionalization along hierarchical lines.”<sup>53</sup> This in no way diminishes the pivotal role of the subordination of women in transforming organic societies

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>46</sup> Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 21, emphasis in original.

<sup>47</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 69.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 40, 50, 56; Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 49, 79-80.

<sup>49</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 143.

<sup>50</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 87.

<sup>51</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 69.

<sup>52</sup> It is difficult, Bookchin emphasized, to delineate in the development of domination, hierarchy, and the subordination of women “the emergence of organized economic classes in the systematic exploitation of a dominated social stratum.” Ibid., 143, 155.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 151, emphasis in original; Bookchin *Remaking Society*, 79.



into hierarchical societies; only that gerontocracy probably was the first form of hierarchy to exist in society.<sup>54</sup> Even patriarchal power had strong gerontocratic traits, as the oldest head of the family dominated all his subjects, both women and men. “Long before domination became rigorously institutionalized, gerontocracy had already created a state of mind that was structured around the power of elders to command and the obligation of the young to obey.”<sup>55</sup>

“In a preliterate community, the most comprehensive compendium of knowledge is inscribed on the brains of the elders.”<sup>56</sup> More importantly, however, is that “only society can cushion their vulnerability to natural forces.”<sup>57</sup> There is no mystery to this development: the “aging and the aged tend to be socially conscious as such—as a matter of survival.”<sup>58</sup> Their need to attain social power is a function of their loss of biological power. Community elders “depend for their survival ultimately on the fact that the community is social in the fullest sense of the term,” that is to say that the community will provide for them “not because they participate in the process of production and reproduction, but because of the *institutional* roles they can create for themselves in the social realm.”<sup>59</sup>

In early human communities, male and female members had distinct tasks regarding reproduction, hunting, harvesting, cultivation, and defense that were all equally necessary for sustaining the community. These coalesced into distinct “cultures” or “spheres,” but in preliterate communities these differences seem not to entail any status and power stratification. Their roles, initially, were complementary.<sup>60</sup> In early societies, Bookchin claims, “male domination served no function when woman’s role was so central to the stability of the early human community.”<sup>61</sup> Indeed, “attempts to institutionalize the subordination of women, given their own rich domain and their decisive role in maintaining the community, would have been utterly destructive to ingroup harmony.”<sup>62</sup> Still, what were mere physical and cultural

<sup>54</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 76.

<sup>55</sup> Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 58.

<sup>56</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 152.

<sup>57</sup> The attempts to socially overcome biological vulnerability and decay had decisive cultural impacts: “The nascent ambiguities of the aged toward nature later give rise to Western ‘civilization’s’ mode of repressive reason.” Ibid., 151, 152.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 150-151, emphasis in original.

<sup>60</sup> The assertion that the social roles of women and men were complementary until social dynamics made it possible for male members of the community to systematically subordinate women in new hierarchies of status, privilege, and power, in no way diminishes the social stigmatization that *later* became associated with women’s work and culture.

<sup>61</sup> Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 55.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

*differences* in early communities would eventually split distinctly into status and power. When they did, it had devastating consequences for both humanity and the natural world.<sup>63</sup>

Domination, hierarchy, and the subordination of woman to man began to emerge with as the male sphere of hunting and defense became increasingly “political” or “civil.” This “political” shift gave increased eminence to the elders and mates of the community who now claimed this sphere as part of the division of tribal labor. “Male supremacy over women and children emerged primarily as a result of the male’s social functions in the community,” Bookchin writes.<sup>64</sup>

But “hierarchy in even early societies was still further reinforced by shamans and, later, by shamanistic guilds that gained prestige and privilege by virtue of their very uncertain monopoly over magical practices.”<sup>65</sup> Indeed, we should not overlook the centrality of the shaman in consolidating early power structures. “Social power begins to crystallize as the fetishization of magical power over certain forces of nature.”<sup>66</sup> In this sense, the shaman is a strategic figure in the historical consolidation of hierarchy and state formations, as the shaman *professionalizes* power and is “the demiurge of political institutions and coalitions.”<sup>67</sup> As Bookchin puts it, “the shaman is the incipient state personified.” It is significant that when cities and empires eventually emerged in Mesopotamia and Anatolia, they were structured around temples and priestly orders.

For thousands of years, blood would be the primary substance that tied communities together through oaths and ceremonies. “The kinship bond is surprisingly egalitarian when it is not twisted out of shape,” Bookchin tells us. “It evokes a simple sense of loyalty, responsibility, mutual respect, and mutual aid. It rests on the *moral* strength of a shared sense of ancestry.”<sup>68</sup> However, “as bands began to increase in size and number, as they began to differentiate into clans, tribes, tribal federations and make war on each other, an ever larger social space emerged that was increasingly occupied by men.”<sup>69</sup> Although the *internal* bonds

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<sup>63</sup> “Perhaps the earliest change in social development that veered society in a direction that became seriously harmful, both to humanity and the natural world, was the hierarchical growth of male’s civil domain—namely, the rise of male gerontocracies, warrior groups, aristocratic elites, and the State.” Ibid, 76.

<sup>64</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 69.

<sup>65</sup> Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 58. The word *hierarchy* is Greek in origin and stems from *hierarkhēs*, which means “sacred ruler.”

<sup>66</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 153.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>68</sup> Bookchin, *Remaking society*, 59, emphasis in original. As for its modern offshoots, the politics of nationalism and ethnic identity, Bookchin has little patience: in light of civilizing advances, they are overall socially regressive phenomena. See Bookchin, *Free Cities*, 17-28.

<sup>69</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 147.

of community were overly egalitarian, these bonds were limited to real or fictive blood-ties, and communities would engage in raids and warfare. Also, it should be remembered: “At the bottom of every social ladder always stood the resident outsider—male or female—and the assortment of war captives who, with economical changes, became a very sizable population of slaves.”<sup>70</sup>

Eventually, certain individuals gained special positions in the community for their prowess, bravery, or generosity. At first, it seems, these “big men” had no *power* in these communities, but crucial *status* differences were established, which later were used to transform the community’s political structures.<sup>71</sup> Over time, these big men were able to gather groups of warriors, companions whose loyalty were to the big man as a person; they undermined traditional egalitarian structures and transformed chieftainship, and their consolidation of power around persons and their companion warriors prepared the groundworks for later autocracies. In turn, these developments would consolidate new blood lines, those of aristocracies and dynasties, and their command of warrior castes would monopolize the use of violence.<sup>72</sup> “Not until distinctly social interest emerged the clash directly with the natural matrix and turn the weaknesses, perhaps the growing tensions, of organic society into outright fractures, will the unity between human and human, and between humanity and nature, finally be broken.”<sup>73</sup> Out of these clashes power and domination would emerge in full, not simply as a social fact, with all its differentiations, but also *as a concept*. “The attempt to dominate external nature will come later, when humanity is conceptually equipped to transfer its social antagonisms to the natural world outside.”<sup>74</sup>

Hierarchies developed gradually and probably along different lines and at various paces; yet, when they did emerge, they spurred dynamic social processes that were structurally, culturally, and ideologically reinforcing. No less important than the actual institutions are the justifications for these structures, and the development of what Bookchin called their “epistemologies of rule.”<sup>75</sup> At any rate, “the dissolution of organic societies into hierarchical,

<sup>70</sup> Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 58.

<sup>71</sup> “What I would like to emphasize is how much hierarchical differentiation simply reworked existing relationships in early society into a system of status long before the strictly economic relationship we call “classes” emerged.” Ibid., 60.

<sup>72</sup> “The bas reliefs of Mesopotamia and Egypt, and later the writings of Plato and Aristotle, leave no doubt that the precondition for the emergence of tribal ‘big men’ involved not only material sufficiency but cultural inferiority. Power, personality, and social immortality are entangled completely with powerlessness, depersonalization, and often genocide.” Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 141.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 150, 152.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 159-190.

class, and political societies occurred unevenly and erratically, shifting back and forth over long periods of time.”<sup>76</sup> Still, “there can be little doubt that the slow shift from rule by the elderly, later the oldest male or patriarch, the change from the influence of animistic shamans to deity worshipping priesthoods, and the rise of warrior groups that finally culminated in supreme monarchs,” Bookchin explains, all formed major turning points in the history toward social domination, class oppression, and state formation.<sup>77</sup>

For Bookchin, it was important to fix this historical emergence of hierarchy on the obscure, shifting ground of prehistory. Here, “one senses a slow crystallization of social norms and moods along male-oriented lines, even before elaborate hierarchies and economic exploitation emerge.”<sup>78</sup> Later, the breakdown of early Neolithic village society also marks a decisive turning point in the development of humanity.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, this “urban revolution,” beginning some 7,000 years ago, would change the course of social evolution: with the rise of cities, the biological matrix of social life is almost completely shattered. In cities, “kinship ties are replaced by civic ties; the natural environment by man-made environment; the domestic sphere by political sphere.”<sup>80</sup> In the millennia-long transition that separates the earliest horticultural communities from the “high civilizations” of antiquity, we witness the emergence of towns, cities, and finally empires: “This was a “qualitatively new social arena in which the collective control of production was supplanted by elitist control, kinship relations by territorial and class relations, and popular assemblies or councils of elders by state bureaucracies.”<sup>81</sup> Of importance were also “the accumulation of food surpluses and the stability these eras provided in human affairs, as well as the development of leisured elites, and finally the emergence of mass production.”<sup>82</sup>

In this chapter, I make an effort to explain the basic critique of hierarchy and domination that undergirds Bookchin’s social ecology. These analyses are essential to social ecology’s understanding of the prospective creation of an ecological society, the social precondition for a free nature. I admit that my presentation does not give a full account of the more careful elaborations Bookchin developed in works like *The Ecology of Freedom*, where there is an intricate historical interplay between the legacies of freedom and domination, which forms the

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>77</sup> Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 77.

<sup>78</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 148.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 130; Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 66-73.

<sup>82</sup> Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 243-244.

“double helix” of Bookchin’s philosophy of history.<sup>83</sup> At crucial historical junctures, the legacy of domination won out, and hierarchies were spread, developed, and solidified, with this trajectory having stained our civilization. Whether these developments could have been avoided is impossible to say and is meaningless to divine, Bookchin stated, but “in any case, social evolution unfolded in the direction of hierarchical, class-oriented, and statist institutions, giving rise to the nation-state and ultimately, albeit not inevitably, to a capitalist economy.”<sup>84</sup> Bookchin identifies a final historical turning point in the modern breakthrough of the nation-state and capitalism.<sup>85</sup> The nation-state and capitalism, he writes, do not necessarily go together. “But capitalism succeeds so rapidly with the rise of the nation-state that they are often seen as co-jointly developing phenomena.”<sup>86</sup>

Although social ecology challenges hierarchy in general, it challenges capitalism in particular. “The modern market society that we call capitalism, and its alter ego, ‘state socialism,’ have brought all the historic problems of domination to a head.”<sup>87</sup>

Our contemporary society is based on endless wasteful growth, and “the ecological crisis it has produced is *systemic*,” Bookchin insists; it is not simply “a matter of misinformation, spiritual insensitivity, or lack of moral integrity.”<sup>88</sup> The present social illness lies not only in the outlook that pervades the present society, he continues, “it lies above all in the very *structure and law of life* in the system itself, in its imperative, which no entrepreneur or corporation can ignore without facing destruction: growth, more growth, and still more growth.”<sup>89</sup> The consequences of this “grow or die” market economy “must inexorably lead to the destruction of the natural bases for complex life-forms, including humanity.”<sup>90</sup>

Although capitalism emerged as a definite system of social relations with the Industrial Revolution of the 1780s, it was not until the 1950s that capitalism had its definitive breakthrough. After the Second World War, “the capitalistic market expanded throughout the world, to a point where it is now ubiquitous and all-penetrating.”<sup>91</sup> Today, the massive penetration of this economy into society as a whole has produced an even more serious

<sup>83</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 159-270, 356-410; A far more accessible and assessable historical overview is presented in Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 41-126.

<sup>84</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 132-133.

<sup>85</sup> Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 85-94.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>87</sup> Bookchin, *Free Cities*, 13.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, emphases in original.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 153.

distortion of second nature than the state ever did. “The market *economy*, which all cultures from antiquity to recent times have resisted to one degree or another, has essentially become a market *society*.”<sup>92</sup> Indeed, “capitalism is the substitution of economy for society,” Bookchin explains, involving “the ascendancy of the buyer-seller relationship, mediated by things called ‘commodities,’ over the richly articulated social ties the past civilizations at their best elaborated and developed for thousands of years in networks of mutual aid, reciprocity, complementarity, and other support systems which made social life meaningful and humanizing.”<sup>93</sup>

What is unique to our market-oriented society is that it places no limits on growth and egotism; our social and ecological crises are generated and intensified by “a competitive marketplace spirit that reduces the entire world of life, including humanity, to merchandisable objects.”<sup>94</sup> Still, “growth occurs above all from *harshly objective factors* churned up by the expansion of the market itself, *factors that are largely impervious to moral considerations and efforts at ethical persuasion*.”<sup>95</sup> Modern capitalism is structurally amoral and the roots of today’s ever-expanding market system lay in “one of history’s most fundamental social transformations: the elaboration of a system of production and distribution based on exchange rather than complementarity and mutual aid.”<sup>96</sup> It was not until the emergence of capitalism that the peasant village and its cultural repertory eventually disappeared as the locus of rural life.<sup>97</sup>

In light of these observations, we are better positioned to evaluate Bookchin’s assessment of environmentalism and deep ecology: “To the extent that environmental movements and ideologies merely moralize about the wickedness of our antiecological society and call for changes in personal lifestyles and attitudes, they obscure the need for concerted social action

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<sup>92</sup> This society is historically unique, Bookchin points out, as “it identifies progress with competition rather than cooperation. It views society as a realm for possessing things rather than for elaborating human relationships. It creates a morality based on growth rather than limit and balance. For the first time in human history, society and community have been reduced to little more than a huge shopping mall.” Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 133, emphases in original. Bookchin’s critique of capitalism was always imbued by strong *moral* indignation. See also *Modern Crisis*, 77-97.

<sup>93</sup> Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 30.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>95</sup> Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism*, 42, 44, emphases in original.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 45. Bookchin does not argue that capitalism created the “economy” or “class interest,” but lambasts it for fundamentally transforming the whole of society according to its market logic. In the process it “subverts all human traits—be they speculative thought, love, community, friendship, art, or self-governance—with the authority of economic calculation and the rule of quantity.” Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 125.

<sup>97</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 130.

and tend to deflect the struggle for far-reaching social change.”<sup>98</sup> The problems go deeper than most environmentalists and deep ecologists recognize, Bookchin argued.

Furthermore, although social ecology maintains that the future of human life goes hand in hand with the future of the nonhuman world, “it does not overlook the fact that the harm that hierarchical and class society inflicted on the natural world was more than matched by the harm it inflicted on much of humanity.”<sup>99</sup> Human beings were the first victims of the attempts to dominate nature. “In a society riddled by hierarchy and classes, human beings are too divided by conflicting class interests, ethnic distinctions, gender differences, and disparities in wealth to be regarded as a culpable species.”<sup>100</sup>

## The Idea of Dominating Nature

Now we are prepared to look at the foundational thesis of social ecology, namely the conviction that the *idea* of dominating nature stems from domination of human beings.<sup>101</sup> “As a historical statement it declares, in no uncertain terms, that the domination of human by human *preceded* the notion of dominating nature. Indeed, human domination of human gave rise to the very idea of dominating nature.”<sup>102</sup>

The immediate implication of this statement is that ecologists should concern themselves with challenging hierarchy and domination. “Hierarchies, classes, and states warp the creative powers of humanity,” Bookchin wrote. Indeed, “they decide whether humanity’s ecological creativity will be placed in the service of life or in the service of power and privilege.”<sup>103</sup> That Bookchin considered this thesis as foundational for social ecology is beyond doubt: “Whether humanity will be irrevocably separated from the world of life by hierarchical society, or brought together with life by an ecological society depends on our understanding of the origins, development, and, above all, the scope of hierarchy.”<sup>104</sup> Our analyses of hierarchy and

<sup>98</sup> Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism*, 43. “The denaturing of the environment,” Bookchin insists, “must always be seen as *inherent* to capitalism, the product of its very law of life, as a system of limitless expansion and capital accumulation.” Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 160.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>100</sup> Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 254.

<sup>101</sup> “By the early sixties,” Bookchin writes, his “views could be summarized in a fairly crisp formulation: the very notion of the domination of nature by men stems from the very real domination of human by human.” Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 65.

<sup>102</sup> Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 44.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>104</sup> Indeed, it depends on whether we come to understand “the extent to which it penetrates our daily life, divides us into age groups against age group, gender against gender, man against man, and yields the absorption of the social and political into the all-pervasive State.” *Ibid.*

domination are directly relevant for our ability to understand and counteract the impending ecological crises. “The conflicts within a divided humanity, structured around domination, inevitably lead to conflicts with nature. The ecological crisis with its embattled division between humanity and nature stems, above all, from divisions between human and human.”<sup>105</sup>

It is worth noting how “hierarchy is not merely a social condition” for Bookchin, it also refers to “a state of consciousness, and sensibility toward phenomena at every level of personal and social experience.”<sup>106</sup> Indeed, “in discussions of modern ecological and social crises,” Bookchin complains, “we tend to ignore a more underlying mentality of domination that humans have used for centuries to justify the domination of each other and, by extension, of nature.”<sup>107</sup> It was necessary, he argued, to understand the “epistemologies of rule,” the domineering mentality that justifies domination, oppression, and hierarchy. “The hierarchical mentality that arranges experience itself—in all its forms—along hierarchical pyramidal lines is a mode of perception and conceptualization into which we have been socialized by hierarchical society.”<sup>108</sup> To counter humanity’s destruction and simplification of the natural world, Bookchin called for a new ecological outlook, new values, and a spirited appreciation of the natural world and its fecundity. “The internalization of hierarchy and domination forms the greatest wound in human development and the most deadly engine for steering us toward human immolation.”<sup>109</sup>

The implication of this insight is furthermore that the ecology movement must direct their attention to social issues, social analyses, and social relationships. As Bookchin kept repeating, “the most fundamental route to a resolution of our ecological problems is *social* in character.”<sup>110</sup> Today, “the historical domination of human by human has been extended outward from society into the natural world,” he said. “Until domination as such is removed from social life and replaced by a truly egalitarian and sharing society, powerful ideological, technological, and systemic forces will be used by the existing society to degrade the environment, indeed the entire biosphere.”<sup>111</sup> In our time it is more important than ever that we develop the consciousness and the movement to remove domination from society, indeed from our everyday lives. We see how this ties in to the analysis I have just presented, because

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 69.

<sup>107</sup> Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 50.

<sup>108</sup> Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society*, 60.

<sup>109</sup> Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 121.

<sup>110</sup> Bookchin, *Free Cities*, 13.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.



“To permit the poison of domination—and a domineering sensibility—to persist is, at this time, to ignore the most basic roots of our ecological as well as social problems.”<sup>112</sup>

Note well, Bookchin would insist, that social ecology is “asking not if the notion of dominating nature gave rise to the domination of human by human but rather if the domination of human by human gave rise to the notion of dominating nature.”<sup>113</sup> Traditionally, political, religious and social ideologies shared a belief in the historical necessity of dominating nature, and that this justified social domination, as it was the only solution to bring the forces of nature under human control. Human freedom, then, could only be achieved by social domination.

Bookchin would sometimes say that the idea of dominating nature has its primary source in the domination of human by human *as well as* in the structuring of the natural world into a hierarchical chain of being. This is “a static conception, incidentally, that has no relationship to the dynamic evolution of life into increasingly advanced forms of subjectivity and flexibility,” Bookchin adds.<sup>114</sup> But “a nature conceived as ‘hierarchical,’” he would add, “not to speak of the other ‘brutish’ and very bourgeois traits imputed to it, merely reflects a human condition in which dominance and submission are ends in themselves.”<sup>115</sup>

“One of the most entrenched ideas in Western thought is the notion that nature is a harsh realm of necessity, a domain of unrelenting lawfulness and compulsion.”<sup>116</sup> Indeed, “More so than any single notion in the history of religion and philosophy, the image of a ‘blind,’ ‘mute,’ ‘cruel,’ ‘competitive,’ and ‘stingy’ nature has opened a wide, often unbridgeable chasm between the social world and the natural world.”<sup>117</sup> This image have had sinister social ramifications. “Theories of work, society, behavior, and even sexuality,” he explains, “turn on an image of a necessitarian nature that must in some sense be ‘dominated’ to serve human ends—presumably on the old belief that what is natural disallows *all* elements of choice and

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Bookchin here asked whether “*culture* rather than *technics*, *consciousness* rather than *labor*, or *hierarchies* rather than *classes* either open or foreclose social possibilities that might have profoundly altered to present human condition with its diminishing prospects of human survival?” Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 135, emphases in original.

<sup>114</sup> Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism*, 38-39.

<sup>115</sup> Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 54.

<sup>116</sup> “The conventional wisdom of our time still sees nature as a harsh ‘realm of necessity’—morally, as well as materially—that constitutes a challenge to humanity’s survival and well-being, not to speak of its freedom.” Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 71-73.

<sup>117</sup> And “in its more exotic ramifications, between mind and body, subject and object, reason and physicality, technology and ‘raw materials,’ indeed, the whole gamut of dualisms that have fragmented not only the world of nature and society but the human psyche and its biological matrix.” Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 52.

freedom.”<sup>118</sup> Nature philosophy is itself tainted by this harshly necessitarian image of nature. “Indeed, more often than not, it has served as an ideological justification for a hierarchical society, modeled on a hierarchically structured “natural order.”<sup>119</sup>

“It remains one of the most widely accepted notions, from classical times to the present,” Bookchin writes, “that human freedom from ‘the domination of man by nature’ entails the domination of human by human as the earliest means of production and the use of human beings as instruments for harnessing the natural world.”<sup>120</sup> According to this view, Bookchin writes, “To resolve the problem of natural scarcity, the development of technics entails the reduction of humanity to a technical force.”<sup>121</sup> Exploitation of people is tied in existentially with the exploitation of nature. “People become instruments of production, just like the tools and machines they create. They, in turn, are subject to the same forms of coordination, rationalization, and control that society tries to impose on nature and inanimate technical instruments.”<sup>122</sup>

Bookchin, as we have seen, stresses the fecundity, creativity, and complexity of nature as a potential realm of freedom. “We may well fail to understand life itself,” Bookchin warns, “if we see life-forms as little more than factors in production, as ‘natural resources’ to be placed in the service of wealth, rather than as part of the creative phenomenon of life.”<sup>123</sup> His views sharply contrasted to Marx’s, who deals with nature as “stingy,” a mere object for human exploitation, and as a grim “realm of necessity” that dominates man in his quest for freedom and security.<sup>124</sup> For Marx, a liberated world was “a world liberated not only from human domination but from the ‘domination’ of humanity by nature.”<sup>125</sup>

The flip side to this view brings us back to the images of the natural world, which often is depicted as a hierarchy, an arena for domination, cruel competition, and endless wars.

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 54; Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 73, emphasis in original.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. Bookchin claims that current environmental thinking shares with liberalism, Marxism, and conservatism, the “historic belief that the ‘domination of nature’ requires the domination of human by human.” Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 32.

<sup>120</sup> Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 32.

<sup>121</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 133.

<sup>122</sup> This image of nature had dire social consequences: “Self-repression and social repression form the indispensable counterpoint to personal emancipation and social emancipation.” Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 75-76. Bookchin would heap scorn on this instrumentalist view and condemned “resource exploitation” as “the art of killing nature.” Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 109.

<sup>124</sup> Nature, as Marx put it in the *Grundrisse*, is merely “an object for mankind, purely a matter of utility.” Marx quoted in Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 79.

<sup>125</sup> Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, xxi.

“Justifying social hierarchy in terms of natural hierarchy is one of the most persistent assaults on an egalitarian social future that philosophy and religion has made over the ages.”<sup>126</sup>

Since hierarchical structures goes together with hierarchical mentalities, it would not solve any problem to merely inverse the relationships of domination. This accounts to a large extent for Bookchin’s concern with deep ecology: biocentrism revealed an acceptance of the logic of domination, only in inversed form. As Bookchin was wont to point out, classically, the counterpart of the “domination of nature by man” has been the “domination of man by nature.”<sup>127</sup> Bookchin’s social ecology sought to counter both these forms of domination by radicalizing ecology, as well as to ecologizing radicalism.

Radical theory historically shared the notion that humanity needed to “overcome” nature. The constricted world of natural scarcity required we solve the technical problems of placing the unforgiving forces of nature under social command. “Yes,” the anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon agreed, “life is a struggle. But this struggle is not between man and man—it is between man and Nature; and it is each one’s duty to share it.”<sup>128</sup> Marx assumed the same view toward the “burden of nature,” but he also placed considerable emphasis on human domination as an unavoidable *future* of humanity’s domination of the natural world.”<sup>129</sup>

Marx’s concept of freedom became limited as a result of his necessitarian view of nature, and by accepting social domination in the larger scheme of historical development.<sup>130</sup> “Marxist theory justified human servitude and the development of classes as unavoidable steps in humanity’s ‘tortured’ march toward freedom from material want and hopefully from social domination itself.”<sup>131</sup> Bookchin would turn this “historical necessity” of dominating nature on

<sup>126</sup> Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 64n.

<sup>127</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 119.

<sup>128</sup> Proudhon quoted in Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 132-133; Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 28.

<sup>129</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 132-133, emphasis added.

<sup>130</sup> Consider the following quote from Marx: “Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis.” Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3, Book 3. (Moscow: Progress, 1971), 820. See also Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, 193-242, 245-268; and *Toward an Ecological Society*, 193-210. For a reassessment of his earlier criticisms of Marx, see Bookchin, *Anarchism, Marxism and the Future of the Left*, 263-298.

<sup>131</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 102-103.

its head. Our attempts to “dominate” nature are not only historically futile, they have led society on a path of ecological destruction.<sup>132</sup>

Yet, Bookchin did not suggest that we could disregard the material preconditions for freedom, as so many in the ecology movement have done. On the contrary: “Ultimately, the abolition of classes presupposes the ‘development of the productive forces,’ the advance of technology to a point where everyone can be free from the burdens of ‘want,’ material insecurity, and toil.”<sup>133</sup> The basic argument Bookchin advanced in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* was that whatever the *historical* rationale for class rule and social oppression, technological achievements had now made universal liberation—a free society—possible. This, to be sure, did not mean that Bookchin believed that we already lived in a post-scarcity society; only that such a society now had become an existential possibility.

It was Bookchin’s attempts to unravel the questions of freedom and the domination of nature that led him to a “drastic reconsideration of the nature and structure of technics, work, and of humanity’s metabolism with nature.”<sup>134</sup> These were the epic dilemmas that haunted the generation of radical theorists known as the Frankfurt School.<sup>135</sup>

“It is worth noting that the major theorists of the Frankfurt School,” Bookchin writes, “foundered on the horns of dilemmas that nature philosophy poses. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s dark pessimism about the human condition stemmed in large part from their inability to anchor an emancipatory ethics in a radically conceived ecological philosophy.”<sup>136</sup> This, I believe, also explains the failure of the Frankfurt School to come up with an emancipatory politics and a coherent ethics.<sup>137</sup>

“Like Marx, the Frankfurt School saw nature as a “domineering” force over humanity that human guile—and class rule—had to exorcise before a classless society was possible. The Frankfurt School, no less than Marxism, placed the onus for domination primarily on the

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<sup>132</sup> Of course, our attempts to dominate nature are all in vain—the domination of nature is an impossibility. We cannot “dominate” nature, any more than a river “dominates” its riverbed, bees “dominate” the flowers they harvest, or we “dominate” the beds we are sleeping in.

<sup>133</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 133.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-75.

<sup>135</sup> By the 1940s, these theorists came to have serious doubts about the prospects of creating a new synthesis of disciplines, and their ensuing works became increasingly pessimistic about the human condition and its prospects for social reconciliation and progress. Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 253-280.

<sup>136</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 102-103.

<sup>137</sup> Paul Connerton, *The Tragedy of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 132-139; For the attempts to elicit an ethics out of Adorno’s writings, and the difficulties encountered in doing this, see Jay M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

demanding forces of nature.”<sup>138</sup> Despite their insightful critiques of positivism and instrumental reason, Adorno and Horkheimer came to consider reason as “hopelessly tainted by its origin (as they understood it) as a means for dominating nature—a vast, presumably civilizational enterprise that also required the domination of human by human as mere instruments of production.”<sup>139</sup> Bookchin claimed that Horkheimer and Adorno’s “residual Marxian premises led to a historical fatalism that saw any liberatory enterprise (beyond art, perhaps) as hopelessly tainted by the need to dominate nature and *consequently* ‘man.’”<sup>140</sup> This fatalism, and their general disenchantment with the determinism involved in Marxist historical materialism, led them to dismal analyses of the human predicament. Their analyses, it seems, most adequately explained how the repression of nature was culturally consolidated and internalized in human psyche; they offered few ways out of this historical impasse.<sup>141</sup> This was in no small measure due to their unwillingness or inability to dialectically discuss historical progress. Bookchin abhorred Adorno’s dictum, “No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb.”<sup>142</sup> For all their flair and insights, Bookchin feared Adorno’s view bred moral relativism and refused to accept that there can be a dialectic “that deals ‘dialectically’ with the irrational, with regression into barbarism—that is to say, a strictly *Negative Dialectics*.”<sup>143</sup> Indeed, “a ‘dialectic’ that lacks *any* spirit of transcendence (*Aufhebung*) and denies the ‘negation of the negation’ is spurious at its very core,” he concluded.<sup>144</sup> In sharp contrast to Bookchin’s interpretation of Hegel, Adorno asserted that “the whole is the untrue.”<sup>145</sup>

<sup>138</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 142n2.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-103.

<sup>140</sup> “However much they opposed domination, neither Adorno nor Horkheimer singled out hierarchy as an underlying problematic in their writings.” Their position, Bookchin emphasized, “stands completely at odds with my own view that the notion—and no more than an *unrealizable* notion—of dominating nature stems from the domination of human by human.” *Ibid.*, emphases in original.

<sup>141</sup> Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, 266-269.

<sup>142</sup> “This inflated, less than thought-out pronouncement, taken together with Adorno’s commitment to a negativity that rejected sublation (*Aufhebung*), or social and ideological advances, was a step toward nihilism, indeed, an ugly demonization of humanity, that belied his affirmations of reason,” Bookchin concluded. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 320; Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 181n15. Furthermore, “Whatever Adorno meant by *universal*,” Bookchin added, “there is a massive history of humanity that consists of growing sensibilities, material achievements, culture, and, let it not be forgotten, great movements guided by high ideals to achieve a free society.” Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 239, emphasis in original.

<sup>143</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 175.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*; “In *The Ecology of Freedom*,” Bookchin wrote, I was at pains to indicate that “the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is actually no dialectic at all—at least in its attempt to explain the negation of reason through its own self-development.” Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 382.

<sup>145</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections of a Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005); Bernstein, *Adorno*, 418.

As we have seen, Bookchin radically reverses this view of the relationship between society and nature and argues “that the idea of dominating nature first arose within *society* as part of its institutionalization into gerontocracies that placed the young in varying degrees of servitude to the old and in patriarchies that placed women in varying degrees of servitude to men—not in any endeavor to “control” nature or natural forces.”<sup>146</sup> This led Bookchin to conclude that “domination can be definitively removed only by resolving problematics that have their origins in hierarchy and status, not in class and the technological control of nature alone.”<sup>147</sup> To a large extent, as Janet Biehl has pointed out, his thesis on social-ecological domination was mounted as a solution to the dilemma that had tormented Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.<sup>148</sup> The triumph of instrumental reason after the Enlightenment, they accounted, had removed the ethically prescriptive force of precapitalist societies with devastating effects on nature, society, and the human psyche. Bookchin appreciated how Adorno and Horkheimer were concerned with the domination of nature and their attempts to provide alternatives to the rationalization of the world, but he could not accept their conclusions, or rather, their disinterest in seeking to find a new grounding for ethics and politics. Bookchin’s solution was to ground ethics in nature, in mediations of evolutionary processes.

Among the theorists of the Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse stood out as a champion for ecology as well as emancipatory politics toward the end of the 1960s.<sup>149</sup> The radical melding of Marx, Freud, and Hegel gave Marcuse powerful ammunition against the hegemony of the “technical apparatus” and the shaping of the “one-dimensional man.” Yet, from an ecological perspective, Marcuse’s approach was limited in both its ambitions and its analyses. Marcuse saw primarily dialectics as a *method* to reveal the “radical falsity” of status quo, not as an immanent feature of reality. Despite his growing sensitivity to ecological concerns, he did not develop an ecological ethics. His forceful application of “the power of negative thinking” was, as with Adorno and Horkheimer, more effective as a *critique* than for any of its reconstructive aspects. In a recent essay, Brincat and Gerber suggest that the inherent limitations of Marcuse’s approach stems directly from his inability to incorporate a philosophical naturalism

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<sup>146</sup> “Various modes of social institutionalization, not modes of organizing human labor (so crucial to Marx), were the first sources of domination, which is not to deny Marx’s thesis that class society was economically exploitative.” Ibid..

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Biehl, *Ecology or Catastrophe*, 143-145, 289.

<sup>149</sup> In contrast to Adorno, Marcuse openly embraced student radicalism and gained great popularity among the New Left.

that sees humanity and nature as a *totality*, precisely what Bookchin had suggested.<sup>150</sup> Without an ecological sense of dialectical holism, the fundamental schism between humanity and nature was unsurmountable.<sup>151</sup> “Marcuse’s despair and ambivalence was directly attributable to the absence of nature in his dialectical approach,” they concluded.<sup>152</sup>

Bookchin’s dialectical naturalism required that he developed not only a philosophy of nature and society, but also an ethics and a politics. In this respect it is important to mention that although the account I have provided here has focused on a broad overview of some developments in the early stages of human history, it is not the whole story. Social development has not been a steady downward spiral of alienation from nature. Bookchin refused to accept a cultural pessimism that was politically debilitating. Despite the rise of hierarchies, states and capitalism, humanity has, he recognized, also developed increasingly sophisticated notions of individuality and expanding notions of reason and more substantial and universal ideas about freedom.<sup>153</sup> These are genuine advances. Bookchin’s focus on the historical *emergence* of social domination was triggered by the need to disprove the historical necessity of hierarchy, which liberals, conservatives, and radicals all accepted as a historical premise. “What renders social ecology so important,” Bookchin declares, “is that it offers no case whatsoever for hierarchy in nature and society; it decisively challenges the very function of hierarchy as a stabilizing or ordering principle in *both* realms.”<sup>154</sup>

Human emergence, even at its earliest stages, with institutions, culture, and consciousness, express the fact that humans can “begin, however limited their consciousness at first, to discover that they have the potentiality to go well beyond the existing circumstances of their lives and, with the passing of generations, develop—conceptually as well as materially—new

<sup>150</sup> Shannon Brincat and Damian Gerber, “The Necessity of Dialectical Naturalism: Marcuse, Bookchin, and Dialectics in the Midst of Ecological Crisis,” *Antipode*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (2015): 871-893.

<sup>151</sup> Marcuse demoted dialectics to a mere method, and as a result he was not able to flesh out the possible ontological and epistemological between human rationality within the nexus of natural evolution. “While Marcuse denies this is ontological,” Brincat and Gerber explains, “his conception of dialectics is premised on an ontological claim because the power of dialectical thought to judge the inadequacy of given facts is made possible only on the assumption (and foundational claim) that subject and object are joined: facts embody the knower (which clearly has epistemological consequences too).” *Ibid.*, 877.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 889.

<sup>153</sup> “To have transcended the limitations of the kinship tie; to have gone beyond mere foraging into agriculture and industry; to have replaced the parochial band or tribe with the increasingly universal city; to have devised writing, produced literature, and developed richer forms of expression than nonliterate peoples could have ever imagined—all of these and many more advances have provided the conditions for evolving increasingly sophisticated notions of individuality and expanding notions of reason that remain stunning achievements to this very day.” Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 165.

<sup>154</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 102, emphasis in original.

needs and expanding ideas about their own cultural domain.”<sup>155</sup> It remains a fascinating fact that human beings can create cultures and “within their historical and natural contexts, they can *expand* their cultures and social ideals.”<sup>156</sup> Their societies can be “structured and embodied in a variety of ways by creating new methods of working together, distributing the products of their work, formulating belief systems, establishing institutions, and thinking out richer or more complex ideas about life and its meaning, including broad notions of justice and freedom.”<sup>157</sup> Humanity also shares some abiding social *issues* to which they creatively solves in a variety of ways, Bookchin points out, propelled by “the conscious imperatives that drive people to insightfully change their environment and render it more secure, safe, abundant, and comfortable with minimal toil.”<sup>158</sup> The formulations of these abiding human issues are latent in humanity as a uniquely innovative species.

## Ending Domination

I started this chapter by mentioning how the conclusions drawn from dialectical naturalism urges us to see society as something uniquely human, because it can be changed according to human will and values. Society *is* its history, and insight into social problems and potentialities requires historical analyses. Then I explained Bookchin’s historical account of organic society and the emergence of hierarchy, before I turned to a meandering presentation of what social ecology means when it claims that the idea of dominating nature stems from social domination.

I believe that this historical account can give us some specific remainders on how to overcome the ecological crisis and reintegrate our societies to the natural world.

First, despite the many horrors inflicted on humanity and nature, we should not dismiss the idea of human progress and the notion of a meaningful history. We must acknowledge that on several levels genuine human progress has been made. We cannot ignore “the long, costly, and often unavoidable maturation process—material as well as cultural—that humanity underwent in emerging from the parochialism of a restricted and mystical world, developing and enlarging its ideals of humaneness and freedom.”<sup>159</sup> In other words, there can be no return; the

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<sup>155</sup> Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 237.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 245-246.

<sup>159</sup> Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 245.



ecological society remains *ahead* of us. This means that we should seek to combine our attempts to reintegrate society with nature, with our most expansive notions of sociality and freedom.

Second, we should recognize that the “stream of human progress has been a divided one: the development toward material security and social complexity is generated contrapuntal forces that yield material insecurity and social conflict unique to ‘civilization’ as such.”<sup>160</sup> But dialectical thought may help us not only to understand evolutionary processes, but to explore human history as well, how the *interaction* between the “legacy of freedom” and the “legacy of domination” thrust overall social advances in human expectations, social ideals, and ethical standards. For instance, it remains a fact that “despite terrible wars, the sophistication of military technology, and the ruthlessness of military conflicts,” Bookchin adds, “concurrent advances took place in human sensibility, expanded notions of freedom and a greatly expanding ethical awareness of virtue and evil.”<sup>161</sup> We should also be mindful of how these interplays took institutional and cultural forms, such as the conflicts between patriarchal authority and emerging empires, between feudal barons and the emerging monarchies, and between parliaments and courts.

Third, we should recognize that however tormented our social history is, we have a history to learn from.<sup>162</sup> That is to say that we can create social *alternatives*, and we can learn from a great variety of historical examples. Society *is* after all its history. Although Bookchin in no way would advise us to emulate or “return to” organic society, for example, there are some of their values and practices that can still be useful to us. Every society projects its own social structures and values onto the world, and we should seek out social alternatives that will help us reintegrate humanity with the natural world. This recognition prompted Bookchin’s “need to explain the emergence of social hierarchy and domination and to elucidate the means, sensibility, and practice that could yield a truly harmonious ecological society.”<sup>163</sup>

Social ecology’s identification of the root causes of ecological crisis is not only “a historical statement of the human condition, but it is also a challenge to our contemporary condition which has far-reaching implications for social change.”<sup>164</sup> Indeed, “Long before an ecology movement emerged, social ecology delineated the scope of the ecological crisis that capitalism

<sup>160</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 132.

<sup>161</sup> Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 245.

<sup>162</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, vii-xx, 147-183.

<sup>163</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 65.

<sup>164</sup> Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 44.

must necessarily produce, tracing its roots back to hierarchical domination, and emphasizing that a competitive capitalist economy must unavoidably give rise to unprecedented contradictions with the nonhuman natural world.”<sup>165</sup> The real battleground on which the ecological future of the planet will be decided is “clearly a social one, particularly between corporate power and the long-range interests of humanity as a whole.”<sup>166</sup>

To sum up then, we can see Bookchin’s “emphasis on hierarchy and domination as the authentic ‘social question’ of human development.”<sup>167</sup> Given second nature’s impact on first nature, hierarchy and domination also becomes the authentic question of ecological reintegration. This insight makes ecology a uniquely liberatory outlook.<sup>168</sup> The primary implication of social ecology’s most basic message, then, is a call for a politics and even an economics that offer a democratic alternative to the nation-state and the market society.<sup>169</sup> But how would this constitute a “free nature”? In what sense could humanity “become nature rendered self-conscious”?

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<sup>165</sup> Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism*, 70. And, it should be added, long before Marxists were able to systematically deal with ecology and wrote about the “second contradiction of capital.” James O’Connor, “Capitalism, Nature, Socialism: A Theoretical Introduction,” *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1988), 11-38. The first contradiction of capital is, of course, the contradictions between the forces of production and the relations of production, while the second contradiction refers to *the forces and relations of production combined* that come up against the *conditions of production*: essentially how class society would be confronted by the limits of natural resources and ecological stability.

<sup>166</sup> “Indeed, to separate ecological problems from social problems—or even to play down or give only token recognition to their crucial relationship—would be to grossly misconstrue the sources of the growing environmental crisis. In effect, the way human beings deal with each other as social beings is crucial to addressing the ecological crisis.” Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism*, 20.

<sup>167</sup> Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society*, 29.

<sup>168</sup> “What ultimately distinguishes an ecological outlook as uniquely liberatory is the challenge it raises to conventional notions of hierarchy,” Bookchin. He emphasized, however, “that this challenge is implicit: it must be painstakingly elicited from the discipline of ecology, which is permeated by conventional scientific biases. Ecologists are rarely aware that their science provides strong philosophical underpinnings for a nonhierarchical view of reality.” Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 90.

<sup>169</sup> Bookchin, *Free Cities*, 13.

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*We must always be on the quest for the new, for the potentialities that ripen with the development of the world and the new visions that unfold with them. An outlook that ceases to look for what is new and potential in the name of “realism” has already lost contact with the present for the present is always conditioned by the future.*<sup>1</sup>

## An Ecological Society

“What unites society with nature in a graded evolutionary continuum,” Bookchin explains, “is the remarkable extent to which human beings, living in a rational, ecological society, could *embody* the *creativity* of nature.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Bookchin bluntly states that “the great achievements of human thought, art, science, and technology serve not only to monumentalize culture, they serve also to monumentalize natural evolution itself.”<sup>3</sup> These achievements “provide heroic evidence that the human species is a warm-blooded, excitingly versatile, and keenly intelligent life-form—not a cold-blooded, genetically programmed, and mindless insect—that expresses *nature’s* greatest powers of creativity.”<sup>4</sup>

Human intervention into nature is inherent and inevitable. “To argue that this intervention should not occur is utterly obfuscatory,” Bookchin argues, “since humanity’s second nature is not simply an external imposition on biology’s first nature but is the result of first nature’s inherent evolutionary process.”<sup>5</sup> It is therefore eminently *natural* for humanity to create a

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1 “True development is cumulative, not sequential; it is growth, not succession. The new always embodies the present and past, but it does so in new ways and more adequately as the parts of a greater whole.” Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society*, 274, emphasis in original.

2 Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 35, emphases in original.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid, 35-36, emphasis in original.

5 Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 131.

“second nature” from its evolution in “first nature.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, “if the self-realization of life in the nonhuman world is survival or stability, the self-realization of humanity is the degree of freedom, self-consciousness, and cooperation, as well as rationality in society.”<sup>7</sup>

Still, as we have seen, “second nature as it exists today, far from marking the fulfillment of human potentialities, is riddled by contradictions, antagonisms, and conflicting interests that have distorted humanity’s unique capacities for development.”<sup>8</sup> But this ethical judgment, it should be added, “has meaning *only* if we assume that there is potentiality and self-directiveness in organic evolution toward greater subjectivity, consciousness, self-reflexivity; by inference, it is the *responsibility* of the most conscious of life-forms—humanity—to be the “voice” of a mute nature and to act to intelligently foster organic evolution.”<sup>9</sup>

The question is not whether social evolution stands opposed to natural evolution. The issue is rather “*how* social evolution can be situated *in* natural evolution and *why* it has been thrown against natural evolution to the detriment of life as a whole.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, as Bookchin would emphasize, the capacity to be rational and free does not assure us that this capacity will be realized. “If social evolution is seen as the potentiality for expanding the horizon of natural evolution along unprecedented creative lines, and human beings are seen as the potentiality for nature to become self-conscious and free,” the issue is, again, “*why* these potentialities have been warped and *how* they can be realized.”<sup>11</sup> According to social ecology, then, the extent to which humanity’s powers will be brought to or against the service for future evolutionary development has very much to do with the kind of society or “second nature” human beings

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6 Ibid., 118, emphasis in original.

7 Ibid., 171-172.

8 The problem, here, “is not so much that human beings, in principle, behave differently from animals or are inherently more problematical in a strictly ecological sense, as it is that the social development by which they grade out of their biological development often becomes more problematical for themselves and nonhuman life.” Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism*, 31.

9 “If this tendency or *nisus* in organic evolution is denied, there is no reason why the human species, like any other species, should not utilize its capacities to serve its own needs or attain its own ‘self-realization’ at the expense of other life-forms that impede its interests and desires. To denounce humanity for ‘exploiting’ organic nature, ‘degrading’ it, ‘abusing’ it, and behaving ‘anthropocentrically’ is simply an oblique way of acknowledging that second nature is the bearer of moral responsibilities that do not exist in the realm of first nature. It is to acknowledge that if all life-forms have an ‘intrinsic worth’ that should be respected, they have it only because human intellectual, moral, and aesthetic abilities have attributed it to them—abilities that no other life-form possesses. It is only human beings that can even *formulate* the concept of ‘intrinsic worth’ and endow it with ethical responsibility.” Ibid., 32-33, emphasis in original.

10 Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 38, emphasis in original.

11 “It is part of social ecology’s commitment to natural evolution that these potentialities are indeed real and that they can be fulfilled.” Ibid., emphasis in original.

will establish: whether society will be a domineering, hierarchical, and exploitative one, or whether it will be a free, egalitarian, and ecologically oriented one.”<sup>12</sup>

“This implies not only that humanity, once it came into its own as the actualization of its potentialities *could* be a rational expression of nature’s creativity and fecundity,” Bookchin suggests, “but that human intervention into natural processes *could* be as creative as natural evolution itself.”<sup>13</sup>

Social ecology recognizes that the future of life on this planet pivots on the future of society. It also contends that evolution, both in first nature and in second, is not yet complete.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, given the disparity between what rationally *should be* and what currently *exists*, reason may not necessarily become embodied in a free society.<sup>15</sup> What is crucial here is the recognition that “we are substantially less than human today in view of our still unknown potential to be creative, caring, and rational. Our prevailing society serves to inhibit rather than realize, our human potential.”<sup>16</sup>

As we have seen, Bookchin holds that “ecology recognizes no hierarchy on the level of the ecosystem.”<sup>17</sup> In the 1960s and 70s, he would highlight the analogies between natural ecosystems and social organization, and urge us to appreciate the fact that “virtually all that lives as part of the floral and faunal variety of an ecosystem plays its coequal role in maintaining the balance and integrity of the whole.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, “the more complex the food-web, the less unstable it will be if one or several species are removed. Hence, enormous significance must be given to interspecific diversity and complexity within the system as a whole.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, he writes, “if unity in diversity forms one of the cardinal tenets of ecology, the wealth of biota that exists in a single acre of soil leads us to still another basic ecological tenet: the need to allow for a high degree of natural spontaneity.”<sup>20</sup> In his later writings, he would not use “complexity” and “spontaneity” as *direct analogies* between society and nature.

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12 Ibid., 42.

13 Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 140.

14 Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism*, 47.

15 “If and when the realm of freedom ever does reach its most expansive form, to the extent that we can envision it, and if hierarchy, classes, domination, and exploitation are ever abolished, we would be obliged to enter that realm only as free beings, as truly rational, ethical, and empathetic ‘knowing animals,’ with the highest intellectual insight and ethical probity, not as brutes coerced into it by grim necessity and fear.” Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 178, emphasis in original; See also, Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 258-260.

16 Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 25.

17 Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society*, 59.

18 Ibid., 60.

19 Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, 91.

20 “Spontaneity enters into social ecology in much the same way as it enters into natural ecology—as a function of diversity and complexity.” Ibid., 89, 100.

But he remained convinced that “working with nature” to a great extent requires that we foster the biotic variety that emerges from a spontaneous development of natural phenomena.<sup>21</sup> In other words, human intervention in nature in no way implies that humanity should seek to gain “full control” over natural processes.<sup>22</sup>

“It is not only we who must have our own place in nature but nature that must have its place in us,” and this, Bookchin believes, can only be achieved “in an ecological society and in an ecological ethics based on humanity’s catalytic role in natural evolution.”<sup>23</sup> For social ecology, an ecological society constitutes far more than a society that tries to check the mounting disequilibrium that exists between humanity and the natural world.<sup>24</sup> We have the capacity to provide an entirely new ecological dispensation.<sup>25</sup>

An ecological society would conjoin humanity’s capacity for innovation, technological development, and intellectuality with the non-human natural world. We should not “confuse the promise of technological innovation in a *rational* society with its abuses in the *present* irrational one.”<sup>26</sup> Bookchin was concerned with new ecological technologies and “their capacity to restore humanity’s contact with soil, plant and animal life, sun and wind, in short, in fostering a new sensibility toward the biosphere.”<sup>27</sup> In the light of such a context, even “purely” technical issues becomes profoundly ethical ones. Through ecologically reintegrating our communities with our natural surroundings, we could provide an entirely new cultural context for educational, scientific, and technological developments.

There are a range of political alternatives that has to be developed regionally. “Logistically, ‘free nature’ is unattainable without the decentralization of cities into confederally united communities sensitively tailored to the natural areas in which they are located,” Bookchin writes.<sup>28</sup> Social ecology also “advances an ethics of complementarity in which human beings play a supportive role in perpetuating the integrity of the biosphere.” According to Bookchin, humans have an ethical responsibility to function creatively in the unfolding of evolution.

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21 Ibid., 89-90.

22 On the contrary, “the natural world must be allowed the considerable leeway of a spontaneous development—informed, to be sure, by human consciousness and management as nature rendered self-conscious and self-active—to unfold and actualize its wealth of potentialities.” Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society*, 59.

23 Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 84.

24 Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, 40.

25 Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism*, 31.

26 Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 162-163, emphases in original.

27 Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society*, 27.

28 Bookchin termed such a politics “libertarian municipalism.” See *Urbanization Without Cities*; Janet Biehl, *The Politics of Social Ecology: Libertarian Municipalism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1998).

“Social ecology thus stresses the need to embody its ethics of complementarity in palpable social institutions that will make human beings conscious ethical agents in promoting the well-being of themselves and the nonhuman world.”<sup>29</sup>

Since the 1950s, Bookchin called for communities that are scaled to human and ecological dimensions. But over time, he came to appreciate the city for its significance in universalizing the human condition.<sup>30</sup> We should recognize “the city as a *creative* breach with humanity’s essentially biological heritage,” he writes, “indeed the ‘metamorphosis’ of that heritage into a new *social* form of evolution.”<sup>31</sup> The city was initially the ultimate arena for transforming human relationships. “Having developed away from the parochial biological facts on which tribal society was based, humanity clearly followed a development that logically lead it to construct cities, form complex civilizations, create the fact of citizenship, and achieve ever-broader actualizations of its potentiality for freedom and self-consciousness.”<sup>32</sup> It was the city, Bookchin explains, that provided the historical arena for the emergence of such universalistic concepts as “humanity” and is potentially the arena for the reemergence of concepts of political self-regulation and citizenship, for the elaboration of social relations, and for the rise of a new civic culture. Cities created *citizens* who, under the best of circumstances, were free to make decisions about civic responsibilities and determine their own affinities based on reason and secular interest.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, if organic societies inspired Bookchin’s visions of non-hierarchical relationships to nature, the emergence of the city inspired his visions of an emancipatory politics. The city represents “a historic tradition—often a highly moral one—that tends to expand uniquely human traits and notions of freedom, and an idea of civic commonality that corrodes the parochial bonds of blood ties, gender distinctions, age status groups, and ethnic exclusivity.”<sup>34</sup> It is worth noting here how history, too, becomes “an all-important vehicle in our enterprise, the counterpart of evolution in an ecological approach.”<sup>35</sup>

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29 Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism*, 46.

30 “Owing to their habitation in villages and cities, to their written literature and systematic modes of thought, to their careful retrospection and introspection, to their substitution of mythopoetic fantasy with rational thought,” Bookchin writes, human beings “were becoming *humanized*, *rationalized*, and *civilized*—veritably a new species.” Bookchin, *Free Cities*, 9-10, emphasis in original.

31 Bookchin, *Urbanization Without Cities*, xvi, emphasis in original.

32 Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 244.

33 Bookchin, *Urbanization Without Cities*, xvi.

34 Ibid, 13.

35 Ibid.

“In so far as I am guided by the Greek notion that the city or polis is an ethical union of citizens,” Bookchin writes, “I am committed to *an overarching vision of what the city ought to be, not merely what it is at any given time.*”<sup>36</sup> We see how Bookchin’s *historical* approach to the city follows from his dialectical approach to social phenomena: the city *is* the history of city life, *as well as its potentiality* to become an ever richer form of human social organization. A free nature here, directly refers to “an ethical, humanly scaled community that establishes a creative interaction with its natural environment.”<sup>37</sup> To achieve an ecological society, we should tailor our social relationships and institutions to the ecocommunities in which our social communities are located.

“The power of social ecology lies in the association it establishes between society and ecology,” Bookchin explains, “in understanding that the social is, potentially at least, a fulfillment of the *latent* dimension of freedom in nature, and that the ecological is a major organizing principle of social development. A crucial function of culture is to render it possible for humanity to *rationaly* and *creatively* intervene in the world and improve upon existing conditions, be they the product of natural evolution or social development. More specifically, “the monumental work of social evolution or second nature is to innovatively *transcend* the narrow cultural horizons of early humanity, however beneficent many of them may be; to go beyond the early biological conditioned social world, based on age cohorts, gender differences, and kinship ties, into an increasingly universalistic, secular, and hopefully rational world.”<sup>38</sup> Generally social evolution has “expanded to a point where differences in opinion over the progressive nature of evolution subtly attests to a radically new sensibility about what the human condition *should* be.”<sup>39</sup>

Whether humanity recognizes that an ecological society would be the fulfillment of a major tendency in natural evolution, or remains blind to its own humanity as a moral and ecological agent in nature, becomes a *social* problem that requires a *social* ecology.<sup>40</sup>

“A humanity that has been rendered oblivious to its own responsibility to evolution,” Bookchin declared, “is a humanity that *betrays its own evolutionary heritage* and that ignores its

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36 Ibid., xvii, emphasis added.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., 234-235, emphasis in original.

39 Ibid., emphasis in original.

40 Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 140.



species-distinctiveness and uniqueness.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, “to ask what humanity’s ‘place’ in nature has now become a moral and social question—and one that no other animal can ask of itself,” Bookchin reminds us. For humans to ask “what their ‘place’ in nature may be is to ask whether humanity’s powers will be brought to the *service* of future evolutionary development or whether they will be used to *destroy* the biosphere.”<sup>42</sup> To alter the current course of social development, a new politics of participation and an ethics of complementarity is needed. “Minimally,” Bookchin declares, “such an ecological ethics would involve human stewardship of the planet.”<sup>43</sup>

“Stewardship of the earth,” Bookchin argues, can and should mean “a radical integration of second nature with first nature along far-reaching ecological lines, an integration that would yield new ecocommunities, ecotechnologies, and an abiding ecological sensibility that embodies nature’s thrust toward self-reflexivity.”<sup>44</sup> If we understand that human beings are indeed moral agents because natural evolution confers upon them a clear responsibility toward the natural world, we should emphasize and praise our distinctly human attributes. After all, “it is this unique ability to think conceptually and feel a deep empathy for the world of life that makes it possible for humanity to reverse the devastation it has inflicted on the biosphere and create a rational society.”<sup>45</sup> An essential dimension of our humanity, which we must actualize to become truly human, is to use all our rational and imaginative skills to rectify the ills of our current society. “By extension, our capacity for compassion *obliges* us to intervene in the evolutionary process of first and second nature and to render them a rational and ethical development.”<sup>46</sup> To become human, in effect, is to become “nature rendered self-conscious,” to *knowingly* and *feelingly* participate as active agents in the natural and social worlds. As the potentially conscious product of first and second nature, human beings are the only ethical agent to eliminate needless pain, destruction, catastrophes, and regressions.<sup>47</sup>

41 This is a “responsibility to bring reason and the human spirit to evolutionary development, to foster diversity, and to provide ecological guidance such that the harmful and the fortuitous in the natural world are diminished.” Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 83-84, emphasis in original.

42 Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 42, emphasis in original.

43 This concept derives from Charles Elton. Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 131; Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society*, 59.

44 A humanity that fails to see that it is potentially nature rendered self-conscious and self-reflexive would separate itself from nature morally as well as intellectually. Second nature in such a situation would literally be divested of its last ties to first nature.” Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 131-132.

45 Ibid., 140.

46 Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 32, emphasis in original.

47 Ibid., 32.

We must go beyond both the natural and the social toward a new synthesis that contains the best of both. Such a synthesis must transcend both first and second nature in the form of a creative, self-conscious, and therefore “free nature,” in which human beings intervene in natural evolution with their ethical sense, their unequaled capacity for conceptual thought, and their remarkable powers and range of communication.<sup>48</sup> Social ecology seeks the enrichment of the evolutionary process by the diversification of life-forms and the application of reason to a wondrous remaking of the planet along ecological lines.<sup>49</sup>

“An ecological dialectic produces a creative paradox: second nature in an ecological society would be the actualization of first nature’s potentiality to achieve mind and truth,” Bookchin writes.<sup>50</sup> That is to say that “human intellection in an ecological society would thus ‘fold back’ upon the evolutionary continuum that exists in first nature.”<sup>51</sup> Only in this sense would second nature become first nature rendered self-reflexive, a thinking nature that would know itself and could guide its own evolution. “*Potentially*, human reason is an expression of nature rendered self-conscious,” Bookchin writes, “a nature that finds its voice in a being of its own creation.”<sup>52</sup>

“The time has come to integrate an ecological natural philosophy with an ecological social philosophy based on freedom and consciousness.”<sup>53</sup> In Bookchin’s synthesis, where first and second nature are melded into a free, rational, and ethical nature, neither first nor second nature would lose its specificity and integrity.<sup>54</sup> “Humanity, far from diminishing the integrity of nature,” he argues, “would add the dimension of freedom, reason, and ethics to it and raise evolution to a level of self-reflexivity that has always been latent in the emergence of the natural world.”<sup>55</sup> This free nature would be a “thinking nature,” a fulfillment of the

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48 Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism*, 47.

49 Ibid., 46; “Adaptation, in effect, increasingly gives way to creativity and the seemingly ruthless action of ‘natural law’ to greater freedom. What earlier generations called ‘blind nature’ to denote nature’s lack of any moral direction, turns into ‘free nature,’ a nature that slowly finds a voice and the means to relieve the needless tribulations of life for all species in a highly conscious humanity and an ecological society.” Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 37.

50 Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 136.

51 Ibid., 136.

52 Ibid., 84; “Although thought, society, and culture would retain their integrity, they would consciously express the abiding tendency within first nature to press itself toward the level of conscious self-directiveness.” Ibid., 136.

53 Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society*, 27.

54 “In a very real sense, an ecological society would be a *transcendence of both first nature and second nature* into anew domain of a ‘free nature,’ a nature that in a truly rational humanity reached the level of conceptual thought,” Bookchin writes, “a nature that would willfully and thinkingly cope with conflict, contingency, waste, and compulsion.” Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 136.

55 Ibid., 140.

evolutionary process in the natural world depends toward ever-greater subjectivity and flexibility in dealing with environmental world.<sup>56</sup>

However, “if we are to re-enter the continuum of natural evolution and play a creative role in it,” Bookchin writes, “we must re-enter the continuum of social evolution and play a creative role here as well.”<sup>57</sup> It is essential to emphasize that second nature is, in fact, an *unfinished*, indeed inadequate, development of nature as a whole.<sup>58</sup> It is *also* an unfinished and inadequate development of society. Bookchin was adamantly clear that humanity as it now exists is *not* nature rendered self-conscious. The future of the biosphere depends overwhelmingly on whether second nature can be *transcended* in a new system of social and organic conciliation, a nature that would diminish the pain and suffering that exist in both first and second nature. It is in this sense that nature, in effect, would be a conscious and ethical nature, an ecological society.<sup>59</sup>

## Lessons from Social Ecology

To sum up, what are the advantages that the philosophy of social ecology can offer? What are the main lessons I believe contemporary ecologists could learn from Bookchin’s approach?

First, social ecology offers the possibility for appreciating the wonders of the natural world without recourse to mysticism or primitivism. Its philosophical naturalism seeks to understand nature on its own terms, that is to say, *through* the various disciplines of natural science, but *within* the proper contexts of life and evolution as phenomena. The alternative to scientism, instrumentalism, and rationalism, which so many in the ecology movement rightfully distrusts, does not have to be mysticism, primitivism and subjectivism, which shape most of the “deep” ecological questions. Social ecology suggests instead that ecologists should turn to a dialectical holism that is evolutionary, secular, and future-oriented.

Second, the dialectical core of Bookchin’s naturalist philosophy offers an approach that reveals the “radical falsity” of the status quo, not simply as a method, but as the eduction of social potentialities. That is to say, the naturalist basis of dialectics offers an objective basis

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<sup>56</sup> Bookchin, *Re-Enchanting Humanity*, 32.

<sup>57</sup> “Never before has it been more necessary to recover the past, to deepen our knowledge of history, to demystify the origins of our problems, to regain our memory of forms of freedom and advances that were made in liberating humanity of its superstitions, irrationalities, and, above all, a loss of faith in humanity’s potentialities.” Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 73.

<sup>58</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 33.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

which thrusts the ethical force of the “ought-to-be” against the existential presence of “what-is.” As such, it may offer objective standards for judging social developments in the context of evolution and cultural progress. Not only is there a logic to differentiation, but there is a “truth” to a development when a phenomena grows into what it is structured to become.<sup>60</sup> Social ecology suggests ways to ground an ecological ethics in something more than personalistic lifestyle choices and subjectivist ecosophies.

Third, social ecology offers an *emancipatory* social vision. It seeks not to replace one hierarchy with another, but seeks, ultimately, to eliminate hierarchy as such from the human condition. It refuses to accept that humanity’s “domination over nature” should be replaced with nature’s “domination over humanity,” and it refuses to accept that “anthropocentrism” should be replaced with “biocentrism” or “ecocentrism.”<sup>61</sup> Too often, when ecological philosophy moves beyond environmentalism, it falls back on an implicit or explicit antihumanism. But there are ways to reorganize “second nature” and nurture new relationships with “first nature” that may be beneficial for both realms, indeed, which may eventually come to embody a “nature rendered self-conscious.” Social ecology suggests an ecological humanism that gives due emphasis to potentiality, integrity, and complementarity.

Fourth, social ecology offers political alternatives that promise ways to veer us off the destructive path we are on and help us go beyond our contemporary anti-ecological society. Most radical ecological activists and theorists are skeptical to the reformist and conformist orientation of conventional politics, but they have little to offer outside of possible changes in consumption patterns and personal values. If it is true that our ecological problems are profoundly social, as Bookchin suggests, and that we need to break down our hierarchical societies to create ecological communities that are reintegrated with the natural world, we cannot afford to not develop a new politics.<sup>62</sup> Social ecology, then, may offer avenues for meaningful ecological activism.<sup>63</sup>

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60 The ethical dimension of social ecology is most fully developed in Bookchin’s *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, *Modern Crisis*, and *Ecology of Freedom*; See also Janet Biehl’s *Finding Our Way: Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1991), notably 107-131; and Murray Bookchin, “Recovering Evolution: A Reply to Eckersley and Fox,” *Environmental Ethics*, No. 12 (1990): 253-274.

61 Steve Chase (ed.), *Defending the Earth: A Dialogue Between Murray Bookchin and Dave Foreman* (Boston: South End Press, 1991); Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, 7-39.

62 “As long as hierarchy persists, as long as domination organizes humanity around a system of elites, the project of dominating nature will continue to exist and inevitably lead our planet to ecological extinction.” Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society*, 76.

63 Deep ecology, by contrast, has not fostered any consistent radical practice. Then again, it is the preservation of wilderness, Devall explains, that “is the highest priority of political activism from a deep ecology viewpoint.” Bill Devall, *Simple in Means, Rich in Ends: Deep Ecology in Theory and Practice* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1988), 161.

Fifth, I believe that social ecology offers possibilities for unifying new popular movements with a strong social agenda. By highlighting hierarchy and domination as the authentic social questions for our time, social ecology pioneered a gamut of issues that concern broad sectors of the population. Unified in an expansive social vision, these struggles can strengthen each other and coalesce into a new municipal agenda for ecological reorientation. While many deep ecologists primarily seeks to preserve nonhuman nature, and thus have a limited understanding of the range and responsibilities of ecological agency, Bookchin would insist that all these issues concern us all, *as a society*.<sup>64</sup> Social ecology refuses to accept that the challenges of our time can be reduced to a series of single issues. When it comes to the questions of domination and social ecological emancipation, Bookchin suggests that “everything” is indeed “connected.”

Finally, I think that the promise of an ecological society would engender intense personal and collective *experiences* of nature. If it is true that personal encounters with the magnitude and beauty of nature nurture ecological responsibility, which I believe it does, we should not accept that this experience is relegated to what we do in our spare time, when we leave our daily lives to experience “true life” as it is out “in the open air.” By reshaping and reintegrating our communities into the “world of life” we would change our very metabolism with nature. Today’s calls to experience nature on a personal, subjective level must be complemented by ways to experience nature on a collective, intersubjective level. Social ecology’s visions of a creative and ecologically integrated society could potentially *universalize* the intense experiences of nature that have attracted so many of us to ecological philosophy in the first place.

So, to sum up: I believe that Bookchin’s social ecology, as a body of ideas, have much to offer ecological thought. These few points I present are not fully fleshed out here, but they refer directly back to my presentation of Bookchin’s dialectical naturalism, his broad social analyses, and his visions of an ecological society. I believe that social ecology offers insights that may sharpen our sensitivity to the phenomenon of life, expand our notions of human agency, and help us find ways out of our current ecological crises.

Having said that, I also believe that social ecology deserves to be developed further. My focus in this thesis has been on contextualizing the philosophy of social ecology, and to show

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64 As we have seen, deep ecology is “not really about saving the world,” Rothenberg explains, “its primary aim is to preserve nature for those who perceive that nature is important.” Rothenberg, *Is it Painful to Think?*, 145.

that it represents a comprehensive and coherent body of ideas. Still, for better or worse, its philosophical ideas are “more suggestive than exhaustive.”

Yet the basic ideal that informs social ecology as the continuation of the emancipatory traditions of the Enlightenment, I find immensely stimulating, namely, its commitment to the conception “that freedom constitutes the defining potentiality of humanness: the potentiality for the self-elaboration of reason by rational praxis until humanity finally achieves the actualization of a truly rational society.”<sup>65</sup> This self-actualization of humanity’s potentialities for reason, creativity, and self-consciousness is more than a distant ideal, Bookchin tells us, “it is the one abiding goal that gives meaning to any effort to change the world.” Here, the notion of an ecological society also becomes a rational society, both in the sense that it is one that governed by reason, in a secular and democratic society, but also one that actualizes our unique potentialities for reason and responsibility. Indeed, Bookchin adds, this is what “gives meaning to the evolution of humanity itself as the potentially creative agent; in its absence the world has no meaning.”<sup>66</sup> The creation of an ecological society would then be highest form of human agency. I would like to conclude this thesis with the observation that it is precisely through this ethical commitment, informed by reason’s conception of “what should be” as against “what is,” that social ecology suggests “humanity can fulfill its potentiality for reason and self-consciousness, thereby justifying itself in the scheme of things.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Bookchin, *Free Cities*, 78.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. I am aware that this quote opens a plethora of questions regarding “anthropocentrism,” inherent values, and evaluation in the world, that need their proper attention. For Bookchin’s responses to such charges, see Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*.

<sup>67</sup> Bookchin, *Free Cities*, 78.

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*Human beings are much too intelligent not to have a rational society; the most serious question we face is whether they are rational enough to achieve one.*<sup>1</sup>

## Conclusion

In this thesis I have explored the concept of free nature in Murray Bookchin's philosophy of social ecology. Bookchin was an early advocate of decentralization and human scale, renewable energy and ecological technologies, but also of new ecological sensibilities and new social relationships. Over the course of four decades, Bookchin would develop his social ecological analyses into a comprehensive body of dialectical thought that fundamentally reconsiders humanity's place in the natural world. Bookchin recognized that today's ecological crises presented a profound challenge to our whole social order, and urged us to develop a new ecological philosophy, ethics, and politics. Ultimately, he hoped, humanity would honor their evolutionary heritage and use their capacities for rationality and responsibility for a mutually enriching social-ecological coexistence between society and the natural world. If we could create a free, ecological society, he believed, humanity could become "nature rendered self-conscious."

Although Bookchin is widely recognized as a pioneer in the ecology movement, his ideas are not well known, and his concept of free nature differs significantly from how the term is commonly understood in Scandinavia. Therefore, in Chapter One, "Concepts of Free Nature," I offer an overview of Norway's strong domestic traditions for ecological philosophy, which

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<sup>1</sup> Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism*, 116; Biehl, *The Politics of Social Ecology*, 176.

have nourished significant ecophilosophers, among them Zapffe with his existentialist dualism and Næss with his deep ecological monism. Although the outlooks of these two thinkers differed greatly, they both shared a fundamental appreciation of “free nature,” as the term is understood in Scandinavia. This outline of Norwegian ecophilosophy, I believe, can serve to draw a sharper relief of social ecology’s unique interpretation of free nature introduced here.

In Chapter Two, “Toward a Philosophy of Nature,” I turned to Bookchin’s philosophy of nature in full, to understand how social ecology arrive at a radically different concept of free nature. I explained how dialectical naturalism understands nature *as* its evolution. It provides a perspective that sees nature as a phenomenon constituting a cumulative development toward increasing differentiation, complexity, and ever-greater levels of subjectivity. Human beings constitute unique beings in the biosphere, with our capacity for rationality, ethics, and creative intervention into the natural world. Human societies are distinguished from animal communities and ecocommunities, to a degree that makes us capable of self-consciously change our destiny—and that of the world. Humanity, Bookchin argues, has its roots in this “first nature,” but constitutes a distinct “second nature” that can potentially become “nature rendered self-conscious.”

In Chapter Three, “Society Against Nature,” I delved into Bookchin’s philosophy of history, notably his assertion that the “domination of nature” is not a immanent feature of human culture, and his conviction that social hierarchies must be abolished to attain harmony with the natural world. To this end, Bookchin distinguishes the concepts of hierarchy and complementarity in his historical analyses of organic societies. Bookchin emphasized the importance of understanding the emergence of hierarchy within early human communities. Organic societies, he believed, provided non-hierarchical outlooks and practices that merit our attention. Then, I situated social ecology’s foundational thesis, which insists that the very idea of dominating nature stems from social domination, within broader intellectual traditions, to show both the original twists to Bookchin’s analyses and how they would lead to radical social econclusions.

In Chapter Four, “An Ecological Society,” I explored which reasons social ecology gives for humanity potentiality for achieving an ecological society. I have shown how social ecology understands freedom as intrinsically linked to increasing degrees of consciousness, rationality, and, ultimately, ethics, with the concept spurring civic engagement. These distinct political



ideas all tie directly into Bookchin's broader philosophical analyses and his speculations about the possibility of humanity becoming "nature rendered self-conscious."

The concept and promise of a free nature is fundamental to social ecology, yet it is admittedly undertheorized, and sometimes also shrouded in polemics of the 1980s and 90s.<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, I argue that there is much contemporary ecology can learn from Bookchin's social ecology, particularly from his ambitious social critique and formulations of a generous ecological humanism. These perspectives, I argued, stem directly from the philosophy of social ecology and its expectation that humanity *can* create an ecological *society*.

My presentation shows how social ecology links nature philosophy, anti-hierarchical social analyses, and political regeneration in the most expansive ecological sense. Bookchin once stated that "it would not be presumptuous to claim that social ecology, whatever its other values or failings, represents a coherent interpretation of the enormous ecological and social problems we face today."<sup>3</sup> I have made an effort here to show the coherency of these views that inspired and sustained social ecology's promise of a free nature.

Bookchin was convinced "that a dialectical naturalism forms the underpinning of social ecology's most fundamental message: that our basic ecological problems stem from social problems."<sup>4</sup> In this thesis, I have explored how Bookchin envisions a transition from the philosophical and ethical to the social and visionary. Overall, I believe that Bookchin's dialectical philosophy of nature, his sweeping social analyses, and his aspirations for an ecological society, offer valuable insights to contemporary ecological thinking, and may help us get beyond the personalistic and often mystical approaches that deep ecology offers.

In sum, then, I have in these chapters, provided the foundational premises of dialectical naturalism: a philosophy of nature that accounts for evolution and agency; a philosophy of history that accounts for the antagonisms between society and nature; and a political philosophy that seeks to actualize a free nature by remaking society. Taken together, I believe they clarify what the concept of free nature means in the context of Murray Bookchin's philosophy of social ecology. His analyses, I believe, provide insights that not only help sharpen our sensitivity to the deeper questions of life, human agency, and ecological regeneration, but offers promise of human emancipation in a genuinely ecological society.

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<sup>2</sup> These debates and their premises are covered in full in Price, *Recovering Bookchin*; See also Biehl, *Ecology or Catastrophe*.

<sup>3</sup> Bookchin, *Free Cities*, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, 35.



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